

# IN THE DARKNESS



*YOU'RE RIGHT TO FEAR THE UNKNOWN*

# **IN THE DARKNESS**

Edited  
By

**Dorothy Davies**

## **COVER ART**

"From The Ruins Part 2" by hyena reality

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## **GRAPHICS**

Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

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*Stories of Death and Darkness...*

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## **Drink The Darkness**

*Neil Leckman*

Drink the darkness, nectar from faded flowers  
It fills up the night, the lonely hours  
Musical madness, the Devil's dance  
The voices inside, in acapella chants  
Silence is golden, the Midas touch  
Quiet is all I asked, was that too much?  
Accusing eyes, flaccid lips, faces of stone  
I cut so often I hit the bone  
Crimson rainbows and the fading light  
My lifeblood flows, we share the night.

## **The Snow Angel**

***Ken Goldman***

“Tell me a story?” the boy asked while his grandfather tucked him in.

“A story?” the old man responded, as always playing dumb. “I don’t think so, boy. It’s late and your mother may not want-”

“-Oh, Grandfather. You say that every time. Tell me a story. Please?”

“You’ll hound me all night until you get your way, won’t you, boy? Oh, very well. Which one, then?” The elder feigned irritation, pretending he did not know which story to tell, although he knew exactly what the child wanted to hear.

“The Snow Angel!” his grandson cried out right on cue.

“Of course. The Snow Angel. A hundred stories I can tell the lad, but my grandson always wants to hear ‘The Snow Angel.’” Even as he spoke he could not hide his smile.

“Will you tell it?”

The old man kneeled beside the bed.

“Some parts of the story are pretty scary, you know. Are you sure?”

““God never listens to crybabies,”” the boy responded, as if he were quoting from Scripture.

“Very well,” the elder said, seating himself alongside the boy in his bed. He spoke in a voice just above a whisper, pretending that he was sharing a great secret.

“A long time ago - over sixty years ago on a wintry night just like tonight - there was a young man whose name was Chadworth Michaels.”

The child grinned with satisfaction at hearing the familiar name.

“... and every night,” the old man continued, “as the boy tried to sleep ...”

... large insects squirmed beneath Chad’s skin and chewed on tiny mouthfuls of his flesh. That’s how bad the pain felt. As he lay awake in his bed pale moonlight shone on his face giving the boy the appearance of a small corpse. He was sweating again, a sure sign that this was going to be one of those difficult nights when sleep did not come easily. Such nights were more frequent now.



The day before, when the grown-ups had thought he was asleep, he had overheard Dr. Bennington telling his mother that the sickness had spread to the very marrow of his bones. Chad did not know exactly what ‘verymarow’ meant, but because he could hear his mother crying he knew that it was bad. She had not cried like that since those last days he had spent in the hospital. Right then the boy knew that those insects inside him might never let him fall asleep. Feasting nightly on his guts they might even chew themselves clear out of his body ...

“ ... Are you sure you want to hear more?” the grandfather asked, as he always did at this part.

The child nodded his head, as the old man knew he would.

“Very well, then,” he continued. “On this one night ...”

... the boy pulled himself from his damp sheets and went to the window to speak again to the full winter moon. “Make it stop hurting so bad. Please make it stop hurting,” he whispered, his voice sounding more like an old man’s than a child’s. He would not cry this time, he told himself. God never listened to cry babies.

The afternoon’s fresh snowfall still caked the windowsill but the magic of the winter scene was lost on Chad. He would be building no snowmen tomorrow morning nor would he be skating on Miller’s Pond. Snow was just one more thing in Chad’s world that seemed cold and dead.

The moon crept behind a cloud of dark wool and for a moment the back yard blanketed in white blinked out as if a night light had clicked off on the world. Perhaps he should try again to fall asleep. Perhaps this time God or maybe one of his angels might have heard him.

Tiny marbles of slush suddenly pelted the window pane although it had stopped snowing hours earlier. Chad heard something outside, a scratching fluttery sound that did not belong to the more familiar sounds of a howling winter’s night. A dozen more slush balls struck the glass like the tapping of a child’s fingers.

Tap-tap.

Silence.

Tap-tap-taptaptap.

Then silence again.

The tapping did not coincide with the wind.

Taptaptaptaptaptaptap ...

“... taptaptap!”

The boy giggled here. His grandfather loved telling this part and with each new tap he tickled the child in the stomach. They both laughed secretly so the grown-ups would not hear.

“Something was out there, all right...”

... and it was just outside his window!

The roof of his father’s tool shed lay to the right of Chad’s bedroom window close enough to reach out to and touch. A lumpy pile of snow upon the roof heaved and swelled as if some creature no larger than a bird had become trapped beneath it.

Something the boy could not see was trying to free itself!

Chad slid the window open and a sharp wind gust struck his face like an icy slap. But it was not the wind that caused the snow squall to throb and pulsate on the roof of the tool shed. Whatever lay buried under the snow lump probably had caught itself in the ice which in the frigid night had become as sticky as peppermint candy. Squinting, the boy still could not make it out. In the sky dark ghost rider clouds drifted free of the moon. For the first time the child could clearly see the small pile of snow and caked ice that sparkled like cut glass in the moonlight.

*The grandfather looked over his shoulder at the full moon that shone through the icicles hanging like bony fingers outside the bedroom window. He leaned forward for dramatic effect, and the child instinctively moved himself closer to the old man. For both of them this was their favorite part...*

... He saw the wing first, a thin and small veined thing attempting to flutter an escape path through the dusty snow pile. The flapping sent clods of ice right into Chad’s face. Whatever creature lay beneath remained hidden from the boy’s view, but Chad did not have to see it to know that it was helpless under the heavy snow drift. He leaned forward, raised one knee to the window sill and reached out. Clawing at the hardened ice, he chipped at it with his fingernails until a large chunk fell free. He reached carefully for the unseen thing trapped inside.

“The snow angel!” whispered the child.

“The snow angel,” the old man whispered back, tousling the boy’s hair.

Chad’s fingers touched matted fur. He could feel the tiny creature throbbing in his hand as its one free wing slapped futilely against his wrist. He tugged at it, careful that the hardened ice did not tear away its limbs. On the third try he managed to pull it free.

Cupping the small creature in both hands, the boy climbed back into his room. He brought it to his bed, reached into the drawer of his night stand, and found the flashlight he had used for camping with his father before he had become sick. Snapping on a thick wash of light beneath his covers, he examined the frightened thing that shivered in his grip.

“You’re no bird,” Chad whispered. “Birds are ‘sposed to have feathers, and they don’t have long teeth like that neither.” He was going to add that no bird was ever as ugly as the thing he held, but the more he looked at the shivering ball of fur the less ugly it appeared. He brought the creature close to his face to warm it with his cheeks. Perhaps the sweating that had become a nightly occurrence might serve some useful purpose after all. The winged creature did not struggle as the boy lightly pressed his damp flesh against it. The touch of its cold matted fur cooled the boy’s skin even as he provided the creature warmth.

Moments later it lay motionless on the pillow beside his face as if waiting for Chad to fall asleep. Somewhere from deep within himself the child found the remnant of a weak smile he felt certain he had lost. The pain had gone! Not a single insect gnawed at his insides!

Because Chad knew the tiny dark thing he had rescued from the snow shared his pillow, sleep finally came.

... and because Chad felt no pain - in the middle of that wintry night while he slept - the tiny vampire bat on the pillow sank its teeth deep into the large blue vein that had become clearly visible through the pale flesh along the boy’s neck, sucked out every last drop of the poisonous blood that had caused young Chadworth Michaels so much misery. And that’s why to this very day over sixty years later...

“... Chadworth Michaels still lives!” the boy cried out to his grandfather.

The elderly man embraced the child as the two of them exploded with laughter neither could fully suppress. Just as suddenly their laughter stopped, for something was at the boy's window. They fell silent to hear it.

Tap tap taptaptap ...

"The snow angel?" the boy asked.

"Go see," his grandfather answered.

The child ran to the window and opened it. The tiny bat stood shivering upon the icy windowsill with its wings outstretched and fangs gleaming in the fading moonlight, as if it had been waiting for the boy to come to it.

In the East the first purple hint of the sun had already begun to push the darkness from the horizon.

"Bring your little friend inside, boy," the old man said. "It's almost morning and you should both be asleep before first light."

"Will you take me out again to feed tomorrow night?" the boy asked.

"Have I missed even one night in over sixty years?" the old man replied.

The child cupped his tiny snow angel in his hands. Climbing into the small coffin that lay alongside the old man's bed, he placed the little vampire bat upon the silk pillow close to his face. He turned upwards toward the elderly man who stood over him.

"Good night, Grandfather," he said. As he spoke tiny fangs peeked through the boy's smile.

"Good night, Chadworth," the old man replied.

He kissed the child's forehead and closed the lid of the coffin.

## **Blood For Blood**

*Matthew Wilson*

The wind howled through the twisted dead finger branches of the ebony forest. Reluctantly, with wide, fearful eyes, the horses trod deeper through the dark so thick it seemed a curtain brushing your face, ice cold hands ready to wrap round your throat and squeeze any moment.

“I hate this place,” a king squeaked, feeling naked without his crown. “Why can’t we wait till daybreak?”

His queen, riding side saddle, steeled her strength. “I’ve waited twenty seven years for this moment, would you have me wait a second more?”

A screeching wind cut through them like a blade and the trio stopped in a barren grove. Silver shaking moonlight filtered through a mess of tangled webs and burnt branches beckoning fools closer. It was the only light source, anything it touched shied away as if a vampire had seen the sun.

“Your majesty, I wish you’d reconsider,” said their guide, a high ranking knight.

With a roll of the eyes, the man who ruled a kingdom but not a wife he cherished, slowly dismounted. “Yes, me too.”

“I’ll wait for you,” the guard promised.

“No.” Isobella spoke softly. “A deal’s a deal, Galamor, return to the palace. I can’t thank you enough for safe passage in this cruel place but that is enough to ask of you.”

Thumping heart lightened by her praise, soul frozen by this witch’s dell, the knight nodded farewell. “Ma’am, your highness.”

He kicked the three horses into a break neck gallop to escape the evil in the shadow. A deal’s a deal, the king and queen were protected, he was not.

“Do you think he’ll make it?” Queen Isobella asked, hopeful. The king wrapped his long coat over her trembling shoulders and put his hand on her back to lead the way, The two were fearful rabbits caught in headlights as the barrier nest of blood-stained thorns drew back, granting them entrance further into the witch’s lair.

“Course he will, honey, course he will.” Alas, he already knew the truth.



Presently the flick of cold candlelight washed over the scorched forest, revealing spiders and scorpions scuttling about their feet, wishing darkness return as spindrel wet things crunched like shards of glass.

“Killik?”

Holding each other, the king blew a shaky breath. “It was your idea, honey.”

Here lies a fool who listened to his wife and not his head.

They stopped before the door cut into the side of a tree holding their secrets or nightmares. Slowly the king eased a hand, fearing it to be scalding hot. Though a trace of sulphur burnt their lungs, surprisingly it was cool. He swung it open.

“I hope she’s in a good mood.”

The grotto was a musty clutter of spell books and bubbling potions where terror stricken mutilated creatures of all kinds screeched for release from the knives holding them down. Candlelight flickering on demon symbols written on walls in blood cast reaching shadows as if to attack the intruders. Softly, a bundle of rags at a table raised a long gnarled bony finger, dry and wrinkled as a corpse in desert sun.

“Come in, don’t be frightened.” A crone beckoned.

“I’m out.” The king scarpered, but was dragged back, kicking and screaming, by his determined spouse. “Alright, alright!” Snatching some dignity he straightened himself, entered and yelped girl like as the door slammed behind him.

“I hate it when she does that.”

“I know why you’ve come,” the crone cackled, not wanting them to flee before they’d sealed the contract. She kept her hood, rotted and thin as spiders’ silk up and her head down.

Killik smiled, nervous. “Hope so, otherwise you’re no good to us,” he hissed as Isobella jabbed her elbow in his side.

Sadly, good fortune had not seen fit to grant them a child. Isobella smiled sweetly, not ready to spoil their chance.

The crone laughed wickedly, having known for many years the queen was infertile, for as long as she'd served as her healer, she'd crushed undetectable contraceptive herbs into her fine meals, robbing her of an heir.

Only now was the time right to reverse that part of her plan.

"A fair trade then," the witch proposed. "Go from this hangman's tree tonight to a glade where none shall venture, there, pick a blue rose, grind it to a fine powder, sprinkle into a warm drink, bake for nine months and voila, but you must hurry for the blue rose only grows this night each century and shall be destroyed by dawn's kiss. The coming of a comet shall signal when the time is right."

The king shuffled, coughed. "And the price?"

The witch's demon eyes sparkled beneath the grey hair flowing over her face, ready for no mortal. "For you, there is no charge."

The king blinked, surprised he didn't have to amputate an arm.

"That's it? No land, no castles?"

The crone smiled as if saying not yet, but held her tongue; it would be a shame to spoil the surprise so quickly. Her generosity was a rare welcome he did not wish to test, so the king led his queen away before she changed her mind.

"There are just two things," the crone called softly.

Killik's heart froze, *I thought there would be*.

"Yes?" he felt blood freeze in his veins.

The witch laughed as if it were trivial. "For the spell to work I shall need your blood."

The king stepped back. "How much?"

Innocence itself, the witch replied, "I gave up that delicacy long ago; a drop shall suffice, blood for blood as it were."

"Please, honey," Isobella hugged him, parenthood never so close.

Reluctantly he nodded, flinching as the hag drew a blade over their hands, returning the stained daggers under her tattered robes as if the answer to her own prayers.

"And the second part of the deal?"

The crone's hunched shoulders trembled, a soft serpent's hiss as if leaking gas made them realise she was laughing. "Send me back a man carrying a bag of jewels, but he must be young and fit if he is to survive a forest unkind to strangers, a lady of simple means sometimes has a taste for grander things and those pretty sparklers shall feed for many summers."

“You won’t kill him?” the king stood his ground.

The witch drew a ‘T’ over her chest. “Cross my heart.”

His bloodline and worse his wife's happiness at stake, the king reluctantly agreed but didn’t move to shake her hand.

“Fine, I shall send the jewels at first light.”

“No!” the crone barked, making them fall back, apologetically, composing herself she sat back down. “It must be tonight or never. Surely you agree a few rubies is small price to pay for new life and, with her majesty's beauty, it is sure to be one fit for the gods themselves.”

Mumbling agreement, the queen bid them gone before the rose died. Yet the king seemed uncertain to step foot outside again. “You’re crazy if you think I’m going back out there.”

The witch soothed his worries. “Don’t fear the dark and what lurks inside, for this night only you are the safest couple to walk these woods, nothing shall interfere with your stroll, I assure you.”

Killik’s mouth was glass; he felt the blood go down as he swallowed. “No potions or magic, call me a taxi or you can-”

Pushing him out before he said something to incur her wrath and sour the deal, Isobella waved good night and closed the door behind her.

She started skipping happily, something she hadn’t done since she was a little girl. “Oh honey, it’s happening, it’s really happening.”

Alone at last, the hag laughed and laughed.

~~~

The body of Galamor Milligan, the palace guard that had escorted them to the epicentre of hell, was never found.

This understandably was not a comforting thought as the messenger barreled with kamikaze speed through the dark forest. Strange, contrary to tales told to him as a child of trees ensnaring him like a rare treat swallowing him down into the sulphur flames and giant monsters slithering down silver threads from the twisted tree tops to tear his head off, suck him inside out, nothing approached, in fact enchanted branches screaming to devour him willingly dodged him as in fear of reprisal from a worse demon. Out of bounds, the messenger hurried on, praising the gods far from this wicked place as he pulled up in the barren grove.



He gently patted his horse's grey nose, his oldest friend who'd saved his life many times over the years, wondering if he'd seen him for the last time. The bag of rubies strapped to his hip was getting heavier with each step.

What if he never came back out?

His horse nudged him with eyes promising Plan B. The bag of rubies was a path to a new life, he could scarper, live on a beach while his gold plated steed got his share of fillies.

He chuckled, a hollow sound to his own ears, laughter had no home here. He shook away the empty promises, it was a nice dream, but his king had trusted him, how could he fail him and look himself in the mirror again? "Here goes nothing."

He cut free the bag on his hip, wisely ditching the dagger, never a good idea to anger a witch.

"Marianna! I'm here by order of king Killik with your rubies!"

Please don't kill me

Hopefully he turned to his horse. "Maybe she's asleep."

A crash of thunder split the sky.

With a floorboard creak, the door swung open, dashing his hopes of her on holiday. Rubies held out at arm's length as if a sacrifice to dark Gods, the messenger was about to leave them on the step when a whinny scream spun him like a bullet to the shoulder.

"Samson? Samson!"

No good, his horse was gone.

*Now how am I supposed to get home?* The chilling thought was, maybe he wasn't supposed to, was unsettling.

The ground apparently opening up and taking his best friend caused the messenger to surprise himself by hurrying into the witch's lair, *better the devil you know*. The thought rushed through his head, before barely in her threshold something scalding hot and sweet like herbs cracked against the back of his head, pitched him to his knees and a darkness from which he'd never wake.

Whistling merry as she worked, Marianna threw down the boulder and, grabbing the mortal by his boots, dragged him deeper inside her lair, the sweet fly lured to the spider's larder with the promises inside.

"He's young and strong alright, he will do nicely."

Having no need for rubies she threw them to gathering magpies to make pretty their nests.

Then, after dropping a severed hand into a bubbling pot, she slammed the door, blocking out the rolling thunder and prying eyes, not wanting to give her pets nightmares.

## Vengeance

*Troy Frings*

The rain strips us to the bone. It had gotten heavier as the night wore on. Our flashlights pass over a white NO TRESPASSING sign but we ignore the warning. We know it's there. It won't stop us.

We reach the chain-link fence and find a small enclave under it in the dirt. It's just deep enough for each of us to wiggle through - one at a time. We take off our backpacks. Sam goes first. She pushes her bag before her and slides in feet first. Marty doesn't bother to wait for instruction. He slaps my arm and, with a grin a mile wide, slides in head first. He has a rather large frame and can't quite fit; he uses his arms to push off the fence and is soon on the other side.

I slide in on my back. The rain punches my face. I make it to the other side before I can drown. Then I reach and pull my backpack. We sprint across the overgrown grass. A dash of lightning flashes across the sky. It brings out the Helmsley Castle. The design is simple: a two story tower in the center flanked by two curtain walls.

The windows are boarded up and we search along the ashlar for an entry point. Finally, we locate a door and Marty pushes it in, just a crack. I tilt my light up for a moment at the top of the door, it illuminates an engraved H; it's a warning sign we don't recognize. I shiver, but blame it on the rain. Sam and I join him and open it just enough to enter. Thunder rumbles overhead.

Inside the foyer, we stream our flashlights along the walls. Mildew thrives. There is no roof so we are denied salvation from the rain and must endure the wind as it creaks in through the rafters. There hasn't been a roof here for a good many decades.

This is the middle of nowhere and it's been ignored by local municipalities and developers. The ground in this area doesn't lend itself for building. Only niche travel guides like *Haunted North Carolina* bother with it.

We want to get into the basement. If you believe local legend, a Native American medicine woman was buried alive within its walls so that the castle would stand.

"Found Macho Pico," Marty declares.

“Machu Picchu,” I correct him. *Get your references right.*

Sam and I follow. The door is small but heavy. Its iron bars are rusted. Marty groans as he pulls it open. Sam flashes her light into the abyss. Dry, rugged stone steps lead the way down.

“They don’t build ‘em like this anymore,” Marty says, his hand following the contours of the wall stones and we march on.

“Your ancestors could build. You should be proud, Sam,” I say with a smirk.

“Don’t start, Anson.” She turns toward me with an augury finger as we go down the narrow corridor.

In the cellar, our flashlights canvas the area. It’s dusty, but bigger than I expected. The floors are bare, save for the occasional pebble. I can’t help but wonder that if pebbles originally broke from the stones in these walls. Maybe even from her purported grave. Then again, that’s just a story. Other than that, it’s an ordinary basement. We set our soggy backpacks down and unroll a couple of sleeping bags.

I take off of my jacket and brush my matted hair back, hoping it untangles. My hair is black and straight. It used to be shorter but grew out and Sam has taken a liking to it. It’s really the only thing left over from my Native Catawba side of the family. So I’ll have a full head of hair at eighty, but I’ll go gray by twenty.

Sam unzips my bag and pulls out a few Olde Brooklyn Lanterns. \$19.95 plus shipping and each lasts forever, the infomercial claims. In moments the room is alive. Specs of dust float before my eyes.

“Think we’ll catch her tonight?” Marty asks as he scans the room in amazement.

“No. Only you would call sleeping in a dusty basement a vacation,” I say, noticing the far wall. There is a tint on some of the stones. A line here; a concave there. Squint hard enough and you can trick yourself into seeing a woman’s outline. I don’t think much of it.

“Anson, I’m from the Big Apple. This is like going to Fiji for me.”

“And cheaper,” Sam comments.

Marty hurries over to his backpack and pulls out a *Haunted North Carolina* guide. “Best trust the authority. There’s a Medicine Woman entry in here.”

“Yeah, right between Big Foot and a Pilgrim ax-man,” Sam adds.

“Hey, there’s plenty that swear by both,” Marty counters, flipping through pages.

“I’m sure there are!” She smiles in my direction. Her grin is ear to ear. It’s the sort of smile that makes you believe everything in the world is good. It’s an innocent liar’s smile. She unties her hair, puts it over a shoulder and smooths it with her palms. Enough drips fall to kick up dust. Her wet hair reaches the small of her back and the lantern’s light makes her eyes greener than they really are. Done, she empties her bag of its contents. A few flasks, cans of generic beer and small bottles are laid in front of her. She mixes an orange concoction and pours it into a water bottle.

“Marty.” She calls his attention. “Try this.” She hands him the bottle. Then she tosses me a can.

I sit by her. “All we’re missing now are sailors,” I say, wrapping her in my arms and we kiss. It’s a brief and simple kiss like the flicker of a candle.

“Hey, I’m a barkeep’s daughter.” She shrugs.

I crack open the can and slurp the froth. Then, I look at the far wall and see the lines are a bit cleaner now. They can be taken for a woman’s figure.

Marty ruins the moment. He has a gulp and covers his mouth; there’s a grimace on his face. He manages to hold it down and asks, “What did you put in this?”

“Rye, yeast, sugar, orange juice. Gotta get you some hair on that chest before we can find you a girlfriend.” She adds a wink at the end.

“Right, well I’m going to be the grown up and reminder of the historicalness of the Helmsley Castle,” He grabs the guide and flips to a page.

“You *actually* brought the book.” I’m genuinely amused.

“Anson, I’m a New Yorker. The only legend we have back home is that the Knicks used to play basketball. Anyway, according to this, this whole area was Catawba territory. The Helmsley Castle is built on one of their cemeteries, purportently.”

“Purportedly,” Sam ameliorates Marty.

“Right, if there are no more interruptions...” He waits for a reply.

I give Marty the go-ahead, but can’t shake off the feeling that the image on the wall is filling in. I figure it’s an effect of the lanterns and finish the can, which I crunch and then pop open a second.

Marty reads, "Sir Richard Helmsley, seeking adventure on his father's fortune and recognition of his own, sailed to North Carolina and joined in the effort of removing the local Catawba from the area. To celebrate, Richard built a castle over the tribe's burial ground. However, the foundations kept crumbling and the colonists constructing it kept dying. Yada yada yada, not wanting to give up on his project and facing scrutiny from the colonists, Richard grew desperate and kidnapped a Catawba medicine woman - you're half Catawbi, right, Anson?"

"Not something I want to publicize." I tuck a tendril behind my ear.

"Well, I wouldn't have you any other way." Sam rubs my thigh. I notice the image is much clearer now.

"Hey, do you see a figure on the wall?" I point its way.

"Yup, I'll bring less liquor next time," Sam says with a chuckle.

"Continuing, the Catawbi woman told Richard the castle would stand only if living person was sacrificed into the heart, its walls. So Richard tied the woman up and stuffed her into the foundations - in this very basement. Overnight, he covered her with stones and mortar. Have to admit he was efficient. He literally buried her alive! Taking the story at face value - there's literally an upright skeleton somewhere in here!"

"That's how you know it's not a real story," I say to Marty who gives me a blank stare, so I explain. "If he buried her alive, two people would know. Her and him. She's buried and he probably wouldn't publicize that he stuffed a woman into the walls of his basement."

"Okay. But according to legend, he had a big house warming gala one night and in the morning they found his body shriveled in this very basement!"

"He probably got kidnapped by English ex-cons," I retort, then say to Sam, "but it's good to know my girlfriend has a psychopath in the family."

"Actually, Marty and I come from Jonathon Helmsley, Richard's brother. He came over to investigate and examine Richard's corpse. That's how the legend got affirmation. Jonathan sent drawings of Richard's wilted body back to England. So really, we only had a psychopathic uncle."

"Great uncle removed by few hundred years," Marty adds. "And Anson's directly descended from the Medicine Woman!"

"Wonder what her name was." Sam's voice is barely an octave over a whisper. A sadness underlies her words as if she's thinking of the tragedy of this woman's life, in the event this is a true story.

I look in Sam's direction and see her head is bowed. She doodles with a finger in the dust. I put the pads of my fingertips under her chin and lean in. I close my eyes planning to kiss her. I am naive enough to think my lips have the power to take all her worries away. When I can feel her breath, there's a clap of thunder. The door slams and it sends a shudder through us. The crashing sound attracts my attention. I shut my eyes and breathe a sigh of relief.

Sam's on her knees with one hand on the ground for balance and the other is pressed against her heart. She lifts her head. Our eyes meet. She breathes deep. "Heart attack at eighteen." There's a flicker of a smile on the edge of her lips.

I turn my head the other way and see Marty. He's facing the far wall with his back toward the door. His face is wide terror. I think he's trying to speak but no words are coming out. I follow his eyes and see what he sees. The figure on the wall is full now and growing out as if it was a loaf of bread rising. Part of me denies it and a smaller part is telling me to run. I stay frozen and the figure emerges. Long black hair, slender frame, butterscotch dress and pale face.

Something tugs at my wrist. Finally, I slowly turn. It's Sam. She's whispering something over and over. Her eyes are locked on the woman standing before us against the wall. Then I realize what it is. She's mouthing 'run.' I grab hold of Sam's arm and we run for the stairs.

Marty backs away but trips and falls on his back. I hurdle over him but the tip of my shoe catches his shoulder and I fall to my knees.

"Get up, get up!" Sam pleads. She's extending an arm to me - not to pull me up, she's too far away for that. But her arm reinforces the words. I jump to my feet, run to Sam and yell for Marty to run. Sam and I reach the stairs, when we hear a shrill yell. We turn to find Marty. The woman is holding Marty up in the air with one arm. Her jaw is opened wide, wider than any jaw I've seen. Something red is going into it. Something that is coming out of Marty.

"Marty!" Sam leaves my hand and rushes toward him. She grabs a lantern and throws it at the woman. It is only enough for the woman to notice Sam running toward her. She catches Sam with her free hand, puts her thin fingers around Sam's neck and lifts her up. She begins to suck a crimson liquid from Sam, whose hands clutch the woman's wrists. Sam's legs kick the air. Marty's body hangs limp in the woman's grasp.

I bull rush the woman but as I close in, she tosses Marty aside and flicks me away with her free hand. I fly back and crash against the stone wall then hit the sandy floor face down. Pain reverberates through my body. I look up and can do nothing but watch Sam flailing slowly. Then she stops altogether. Her hands lose their grip and her arms fall to her side. The woman drops her to the ground.

Now she heads for me. I try to stand but can hardly move. I look down at the dusty floor hoping to find the strength to make a run. I notice a steady trickle of blood hitting the floor. I don't have to guess that it's mine. Then I see her bony feet inches from my nose. Before I can do anything, she puts both hands around my neck and hoists me up. Her eyes are just white with no retinas. She opens her mouth and jaw drops like that of an anaconda.

Suddenly she lets me go. I hit the ground hard and try to crawl away. She doesn't come after me. Instead, her mouth resets. She points a long, thin finger at me.

"Catawba," she says and turns away. She walks by the carnage of shriveled bodies to the wall at the far end of the room. When she reaches the wall, she faces me again and fades into the stones until only the faint lines of her figure remain.

All I can do is survey what has happened. Marty and Sam lie languid and withered, lit up in the lantern light. Then I break. I cry for the childhood memories and nonsensical jokes I already miss. I weep for the girl I will never hold again.



## **The Perfect Child**

***Ron Koppelberger***

Nocturnal indigo shadow and the silhouette of swaying sylvan whimsy lay near the borders of his sleep. A subdued misty star shine shone in twinkling diamond brilliance through Josh Holles' bedroom window. He hugged the stuffed panda close to his young bosom. The sound of crickets chirping in symphony with his exhalations, his heartbeat served to advance the notion of fear in his young mind.

The memory of the fracas, the fray, the perfect boy in scarlet and emerald sash tumbled through his mind in slashes and slices of little boy trauma. The chaperone and headmaster had walloped the adorned boy, mister perfect, the wild child and bully boast. Now Josh lay in beaded sweat, waiting for the reprisal from the perfect monster, the demon of the Crombes' orphanage. Josh lay in silent contemplation of the symptom.

"Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the lord my soul to keep," he prayed out loud as the perfect boy pushed open the door to Josh's room. He stared at Josh with glowing red eyes as he levitated into the room. The love of god would protect him. The boy became unbound, his silhouette becoming larger, looming and satisfying the contrary likeness of perfect humanity. In fear, Josh hugged his panda tighter and the perfect monster towered closer to the faded blue tintured ceiling. Red and orange haired clowns stared back from the multi-colored walls as the demon's mouth opened in a gaping silent growl. Fangs dripped saliva and blood. Josh abided his fear with a whimper at the sight. The light flashed on suddenly and Cromber Yegg stepped into the bedroom. The monster abated and became a boy again.

"Master Nick!" he yelled. The perfect guise of human innocence and guileless childhood ambiance staggered in bleary eyed half-sleep to the command of Cromber Yegg. Cromer swatted the boy on the behind and grabbed his hand, leading him out of the room. Josh smiled at the tearful guise of a perfect demon as he laughed gleefully. The boy's eyes flashed a bright crimson for a moment, the whites filled with blood and hate as Cromber jerked him from the room. Josh hugged his panda close and closed his eyes. Tomorrow night was a million miles away.

## Good and Evil

*Timothy Frasier*

Faye climbed up the fold-down ladder well for a sixty year old woman. She was conscious of her skirt and the fact that Donnie would be looking up as he stood beneath, steadying the ladder. She reached the top and crawled awkwardly through the trapdoor and into the attic. Donnie rushed up the ladder and into the attic, moving smoothly for a short, overweight man. He pulled the ladder up with a rope he had tied to it for that purpose. Seconds after shutting the trapdoor, they heard the glass in the back door shatter.

They both held their breath as heavy footsteps tromped slowly across the floor, stopping directly beneath them. The setting sun's light filtered through the air vent, casting them both in an eerie glow, a dying gasp before total darkness set in. Donnie put his hands on the trapdoor and leaned close, but before he could open it, Faye grabbed his left arm with one hand, and placed her other hand on the door to hold it in place.

Donnie glared at her in the twilight of the attic. He was an evil man and now he had no reason to conceal that fact.

"Get your fucking hand off me, bitch!" he hissed. "I'm not bullshitting!"

"Donnie," she said softly, "What you do affects my life too. Whatever's down there may be looking up at us this very moment." She moved her hands. Donnie left the door in place, though he still glared at her. In seconds, the presence below them began shuffling forward through the house, into every room. They could hear its progress as lamps fell to the floor, furniture crashed and dishes shattered. After what seemed an eternity, the back door opened and they were alone again.

"What's up here?" he asked bluntly.

"It's mostly clothes and Christmas decorations. Photo albums of all my students are in those boxes to your left." A smile caressed her lips as she allowed herself to think of her students.

"They're just pictures of dead people now!" he said crassly. "Well, except for me. I'm in some of those albums."

"I remember you as a quiet boy. You always kept to yourself. I tried so hard to get through to you, but I failed." She said this with a sad look of reflection, hidden now in the darkness of her attic.

“There was nothing to get through. Don’t you get it? I wanted nothing to do with the shit bags I went to school with, or the shit bags that taught me for that matter. I was on a whole different plane than the rest of you. I know how the first human must have felt walking among the Neanderthals. There was no reason to be sad for me. If anyone should have been sad, it would have been me for the rest of you, but I wasn’t. You were all just a bunch of gut-sacks I had to deal with. No more, no less.”

Faye felt the burning sensation as tears threatened and changed the subject. “How long do you think we should wait before we try my car? Once we get to Brian’s farm, we’ll be safe.”

“Me and your nephew didn’t see eye to eye on very much when he lived here. What makes you think he’ll welcome me with open arms?”

“Brian’s not one to carry a grudge. He’ll be happy to see us both. The fact that you helped get me to him would cancel any differences you had in the past.”

“Does he have any kids?”

“Yes... three daughters. Emily who’s eleven, Kirstin... she’s just turned nine and the baby... Jess. Jess will be a year old next week.”

“Does Brian have guns? If he doesn’t have anything to fight with, it would be a wasted trip.”

“Brian’s an avid hunter. His wife Shelly also knows how to shoot. Do you think what’s happening here is happening that far away?”

“Crossfield’s only twenty miles from here. If it was just here, there’d be some commotion outside of town. There’s nothing but silence. That tells me the front line is beyond the sound of a gunshot and that would be a few miles in these flatlands. Could be we’re the only one’s still alive in all of Iowa.”

“I have faith that my nephew and his family are still alive and well. As soon as the sun comes up, I think we should make a dash for their farm.”

“I can take your car and go wherever I want to! You had better stay on my good side or I’ll leave you here alone... or worse!” Donnie stared at Faye in the darkness. If Faye could have seen his eyes, she would have understood the implications of his last two words.

“They have food and water. The nearest neighbor is over two miles away. I would wager they’re safe and untouched by this nightmare. Where would you go on your own, Donnie?”

Donnie sat silent for several minutes. “Maybe it would be best to go there. Lay low till the Feds get everything back to normal. A little farm living might just give me a better attitude. How old did you say his daughters were?”

“It’s a good place to live. We should try to get some rest.” Faye fumbled through the darkness until she found an old box of clothes. She tossed an armload in his general vicinity. “Here’s something you can use to make a bed.”

He grunted as he pushed them into a pile, slipped off his clothes and sprawled out on top of his makeshift pallet. “I hope you don’t mind if I get comfortable.” He laughed. “If you want, you can come over here and bed down with me. You’re not half bad for an old lady.”

Faye could feel her face burning in the dark. Of all people to be in this situation with, why did it have to be him? There was something about him, she couldn’t quite remember. He’d been in some type of trouble several years ago. Maybe by morning she would remember.

They were awakened the next morning by the sounds of screeching tires, followed by the screams that had become all too familiar. One of the unfortunate travelers kicked in the front door but failed to escape his attackers. The man screamed amid horrible ripping sounds. Faye and Donnie breathed softly as they tried to calm their pounding hearts. By the time the sun was near setting, the house sounded empty again.

“We’re going to go as soon as it’s dark,” Donnie whispered through a parched throat.

“I thought you said traveling during the day would be safer.” Faye’s throat was dry, but she seemed to be faring better than Donnie.

“Are you stupid? We’ll be dead of thirst if we wait much longer. I’ll open the door and drop the ladder, then you can go down to see if it’s clear.” His tone made it clear that his mind was made up. He eased the door open, grabbed the ladder and fed it down carefully until it banged loudly on the hardwood floor. They both froze in place for several moments. Deciding that they’d not been heard, he leaned through the opening and listened.

“Do you think it’s safe?” Faye whispered.

“That’s what I need you to determine,” Donnie snickered. “I’m thirty years old with a lot more living to do. By the way, how do I get to your nephew’s farm? You need to draw a map in case something happens to you.”

“I’m afraid of what may happen to me if you know how to get there on your own!”

“Be that way. Who knows, it may be up to me to repopulate the world when this is all over. How old did you say those little girls were?”

“Move over... I’m going down.” Faye started towards the opening.

“If you’re willing to ‘go down,’ you can definitely be a part of my world!” He whispered.

Faye reached the floor with no problem. Her need for water reached a critical point, she moved quickly to the refrigerator and then paused. The light would shine like a beacon in the dark kitchen. She walked over to the sink, opened the bottom door and retrieved a bottle of water. She gulped it down, barely stopping for air. She finished off another bottle and then tossed one up to Donnie. She was amazed he caught in the dark.

As Faye stepped into the living room for her purse and car keys, her foot connected with something large and fleshy on the floor. She shuddered but stayed frozen in place. After a few moments, she knelt slowly and reached out with her right hand until she connected with bare skin.

“Oh!” she exclaimed much louder than she should, while jerking her hand back. After a few moments, she steeled her nerves and reached out and felt the cold flesh of a shoulder. She traced down the shoulder until she felt jagged flesh where an arm should be. Faye stood quickly and stumbled to her purse. She felt inside the side pocket and retrieved the keys to her Explorer.

“Where are you?” Donnie hissed. He had just reached the floor.

“There’s a dead person in there.” Faye whispered as she entered the kitchen. “I believe we should go now, while everything is quiet.”

“We will, just as soon as I get another drink.”

“No!” Faye said aloud as Donnie opened the refrigerator while looking back at her. The kitchen lit up from the light, framing his face in sheer terror. At that moment, Faye remembered what Donnie had done to get in trouble all those years ago.

“We’ve got to go now!” Faye said as she rushed out of the side door and to her driveway. She hit key fob and unlocked the driver’s side door as trash cans went crashing on their sides not twenty feet away. She opened her door and bounded in while Donnie beat on the passenger side door.

“Open the door, bitch! Hurry up!” he screamed.

Faye cranked the Explorer and cracked the passenger side window a couple of inches. "I'm really sorry Donnie, but you can't come with me."

"No! Open this door or I'll punch the glass out!"

"I remember why you were sent to jail, Donnie. My nephew has those three little girls, so you understand. Don't you?"

"You can't just leave me like this!"

"Sorry, Donnie, but you're fucked!"

Donnie hesitated. Even in his dire situation, Faye's language shocked him momentarily. He punched the glass once with no effect but before he could try again, he was grabbed from behind and pulled screaming to the ground. Faye put the Explorer in drive and turned on her headlights.

"What has this world come to?" she said as she pulled out onto the street, avoiding the dark shapes that were moving to where Donnie still screamed and struggled.

## **Last Journey**

*Patricia Anabel*

Enter Darkness, welcome guest  
I'm ready for my final quest  
Across the river to Underworld  
Silent Charon utters no word

For my soul is Hades waiting  
This will be so disappointing  
My psyche for long time is lost  
Eternal youth at the highest cost

Bearer of death I used to be  
Till Reaper laid his eye on me  
So I cross rivers of no tomorrow  
Embrace the peace, and not the sorrow.

## **From The Dead of D.C.**

*C.D. Carter*

The Metro train screeched on its tracks and jostled through the midnight-black underground tube. The old woman swayed in a deadweight dance, her chin firmly planted on her bird-bone chest. There were still no signs of life - none that Amanda Cleary could see - and the likelihood of being seat mates with a corpse became awfully real.

Nightmarishly real.

How was she the only one to notice? There were a couple of dozen people sitting miserably on the Metro train this steaming June late afternoon as it whipped around the outer edges of Washington, D.C. toward the Maryland suburbs, and no one paid so much as a glance to the dead woman planted next to Amanda.

The old woman's head was bent so far forward, in such an unnatural way, that she looked to be folded in half. The strength left Amanda's legs and she suddenly dreaded getting up from her seat when the train eventually arrived at her stop. Probably she'd topple over, her legs shaky and weak.

After a workday that seemed to have no end, Amanda had sat in the back of the train, in a nook behind a slim piece of Plexiglas installed near the door. The dead woman had plopped down next to her at some point, although Amanda couldn't pinpoint when, exactly, that had happened. Had it been Cleveland Park? Bethesda?

She thought of shaking the skeletal shoulder, but couldn't, because she was sure even a gentle touch would dislodge the body from its seat and send it falling onto her lap.

She needed a distraction. Amanda wished she had her book. Where the hell *was* her book? When she looked up and saw the thin piece of Plexiglas extending from the floor to the ceiling, the crown of her head throbbed. As quickly as the agony appeared and made her cringe and grab the top of her head, it was gone.

Amanda looked again at the dead woman, this time from the corner of her eye.

Maybe, if worse came to morbid worse, the fresh cadaver would tumble off her seat, land on Amanda's feet, and roll across the filthy



carpeted floor until it was sprawled, glaring blindly at the train's ceiling. Her heartless fellow Metro riders couldn't ignore her then.

The thought froze Amanda Cleary's spine, one vertebra at a time, from bottom to top and back again.

She looked down to see socks staring back at her from the Metro carpet floor. Shaking her head in disbelief, Amanda bent over and checked under her seat, knowing that her shoes must be there. But they weren't. She was shoeless – an unsanitary condition, at best, on the D.C. Metro. Amanda ducked her head beneath her seat again to look for her purse, which must've slid out of view as the train jolted and jerked down the red line. The purse, like the shoes, was nowhere. She figured her coach bag was sitting on her work desk at DC Minute, a political website she had written for since... December? January? She couldn't remember.

February, maybe.

None of that mattered, though. Even knowing she should do something other than gawk, Amanda couldn't peel her eyes from the unconscious woman within inches of her on the Metro train's shared orange pleather seat. The thought of explaining to the police why she had sat next to a corpse for eight stops made Amanda squirm. She considered walking away, sitting down next to someone else, forgetting she had ever seen this deceased Golden-ager.

The train screeched to a halt at the Rockville stop, a few people exited, twice as many entered and the likely-deceased senior citizen sat still with her neck bent at an unholy angle.

The Metro conductor told his passengers that the next stop was Shady Grove, the end of the Metro's red line. Relief washed over Amanda -- this was her stop, finally, after winding from the dead center of D.C.

She thought of her purse and hoped it was safe in DC Minute's office. And when she remembered that her feet were bare except for two socks that were once much whiter and brighter, her heart picked up its pace. Something about the feeling of slipping out of those shoes brought that same pain to Amanda's head, like an ice-pick hammering away at her skull until...

The corpse leaned on her.

The train had jolted forward and knocked the dead woman from her position of semi-permanent rest. Amanda could wait no longer. She was sitting to the right of the emaciated old crone, so she reached across the

woman with her left hand and grabbed the lady's shoulder with her thumb and forefinger, touching her like she would pick up a piece of trash from the ground.

The woman's head shot up, back and toward Amanda, scanning her without a hint of emotion in her face of aged creases.

Her eyes were swollen with sleep and Amanda smelled her sour breath when she yawned in her face. It was the single rudest act she had ever witnessed. Amanda feigned a smile and began to tell the coffin dodger that she thought the woman had died eight stops ago. The lady looked at Amanda, ignoring her, unflinchingly oblivious to the Metro rider who had shaken her from her homeward slumber.

The once-dead woman turned away, grabbed her brown leather purse and slung it over her shoulder.

Amanda watched, slack jawed and offended, as the woman followed a trail of business attire out of the Metro train, onto the Shady Grove platform, down the escalator and out of sight.

"Red line to Glenmont," the conductor's muffled voice said over the loudspeaker, announcing to new riders that his train was about to make the twenty-six-stop trek to the other end of the circuitous Metro red line.

A scant crowd boarded. A guy in a fire-engine red Washington Capitals jersey gave Amanda a sideways glance as she headed for the door. And stopped. She was confused. Was Shady Grove really her stop? Was that home? No, home was Grosvenor. Or Twinbrook?

Panic swept over Amanda and she leaned forward and asked the man in the Caps jersey - for reasons she didn't know - whether this was her stop.

"Do I live here?" she asked, fighting a rush of tears that blurred her vision. Amanda heard her voice as something distant, something not quite there. "Is this where I get off? Is this what I've been looking for?"

Then she thought of a better question and asked the perfect stranger, "Where are my shoes? Where did they go?" It took more restraint than she had ever exercised to hold back the flood of screaming and tears and the emotional collapse that pushed at her insides.

The gangly hockey fan said nothing. His eyes met Amanda's for a moment, then shot back to his shoes. He slumped in his seat and closed his eyes, as unspeakably rude as the old lady who slept with a craned neck.

The ding-dong of the closing door sounded from behind Amanda.

She reached her hand between the automatic sliding doors and withdrew it to let the train shut. The train jumped forward and sent Amanda into the clear plastic shield on one side of the Metro door. When her shoulder touched the Plexiglas, something inside Amanda clicked – broke, maybe – and she lived through the moment when she lost her shoes, or, more accurately, her shoes lost her.

People on a packed train, a hot train, a quiet train, going home for the night, ignoring each other and thinking of dinner or drinking or the kids or TV or sex, or all of those things. Bumping along the track, as usual, as it was on every Wednesday at five o'clock, looking forward to life's relentless monotony. A girl, no older than seventeen, sleeps in the seat next to Amanda, way off in dreamland, her ponytail hanging on her shoulder as her head lolls to the right. And then, an absurd hallucination interrupts the soul-crushing dullness of an evening commute and the train lifts – it feels like it's flying; there is no more bumping. The rumble starts from somewhere unseen, but in a half of a split second, it's here, in this Metro car, shaking the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. Before the trembling even registers, Amanda feels her neck snap back and her body move forward, as if someone had kicked her in the small of the back. It hurts, it hurts a lot, in fact, but the aching vanishes when her head smacks the clear, hard structure four feet in front of her, the Plexiglas, numbing her body from the neck down before she even hits the floor. And when she lands and bounces on that carpet, she looks down to see the arms that won't move and below that, the legs that have no life and below that, feet in socks. Amanda's shoes, she sees, are still sitting beneath her seat because whatever had caused this Metro train to lift and tumble had done so with enough force to catapult Amanda Cleary out of her shoes. The sleeping girl is still peaceful, her eyes closed and her head tilted to the right, with only one difference: A long metal rod is protruding from the middle of her chest. Smoke and fire surround her. Amanda, feeling the fire's heat on her face and not her body, closes her eyes when she feels warmth running from her hair onto her forehead and down her cheeks. It feels like tears. When Amanda drifts off, she hopes her headache will be gone when she awakes. Everything will be okay when she wakes up.

Her panic subsided.

Amanda was sure, suddenly and for no particular reason, that she would recognize her stop - her home - when she got there. When she saw it,

she would know. There was a stop for her, somewhere on this line that never stopped, back and forth, back and forth.

Back and forth.

In the meantime, she thought it might be nice to sit back and relax, but when she was settled in her seat, she couldn't help but stare at the man next to her, dressed in a Capitals jersey, his eyes shut and his head bobbing to the bumps of the Metro.

Her spine turned to ice. This man was dead - no doubt about it. He was dead and he would soon fall over, onto Amanda.

Three stops later, at White Flint, Amanda Cleary could wait no longer. She grabbed the man's shoulder with her thumb and forefinger and shook. The hockey fan's eyes eased open and searched to his right - away from Amanda - and then left, directly at Amanda. He blinked and did not acknowledge her.

"Sorry to wake you, but I..."

Amanda stopped. The man looked behind him only to find empty seats. Slouched into his seat once again, he shut his eyes and drifted off.

Five stops later, at Van Ness, Amanda looked to her left and was dead certain she was seat mates with an ice-cold corpse. His mouth was opened stupidly. No one could look that ridiculous, unless they had died.

Like this guy, right here.

She reached for the man's shoulder and his eyes flashed open. Amanda was frightened by those eyes - wide and terror stricken. She wanted to apologize, to tell him that she was so sorry, that she didn't mean to scare him.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay," Amanda wanted to say. She felt her eyes well with tears until they spilled down her cheeks. Sadness was all that existed in that moment. For a reason she couldn't voice, Amanda buried her face in her hands and wept.

The Caps fan scanned the Metro train with wild eyes as he looked for who, exactly, had woken him.

## **Riding the Parkway Circular**

*A J Humpage*

The scent of death laced the air.

His reflection shimmered.

An impenetrable blackness pressed against the window, oppressive and spliced intermittently by fleeting lights in the distance as the train cut through the blackened landscape.

He peered at the other reflections in the glass: the woman at the front of the carriage, reading from her Kindle, the young black guy sitting alone and listening to music on smart headphones; the tinny percussion just audible above the monotonous drone of the train over the tracks. Then his attention lingered over the couple in the corner, sitting close and holding hands as they smiled at each other, then at their reflections. At the far end of the carriage, tucked into the corner, a happy drunk kept the loitering stench of beer and piss to himself.

A handful of people.

The train was usually empty by 2am. Most of the local clubbers and revellers had gone home, and only a few people remained.

That was the time he preferred, the early hours that teetered on the cusp of the approaching morning.

He often travelled the Parkway Circular, always at night, just to watch people.

The train travelled around a large orbit area which covered the suburbs and cut through a large area known as St Peter's Park, before stopping off at the city. From there it returned, travelling its circular route all day, all through the night and into the early hours.

The people who travelled on the trains fascinated him; the faces with no names, people with hidden histories, people who sometimes travelled without purpose, people who mostly remained mute, lost to their own world. Even those people who couldn't shut the hell up provided him interest. They were all shuttered inside the train and trapped like cattle. There he could watch them, gauge them.

People were always non-expressive during the journey from station to station, he noticed, yet he could tell something about each person, he could see behind the glazed expressions and supposed nonchalance and he would

often imagine what their lives were like, who they were, where they were going so late at night and who they were going home to.

But most of all he liked the sense of seclusion within the carriages. Funny how some people preferred the company of others within on a journey, while others remained alone, happy with their solitude. He preferred the latter and always shunned unwarranted attention from fellow passengers. He made a point of never engaging with them.

Perhaps it was because humans preferred the security of a pack. Safety in numbers.

But there were other reasons he enjoyed riding the Parkway Circular at night. A satisfaction of a different, darker kind.

The cool silence of near empty carriages seemed like a comfort against the clamour outside, somehow shielding him from the blur and noise of the city, the weather or other people and soothing his senses with the hum of the engines and the repetitive, soporific lick of the tracks.

He was always the last off the train. It didn't matter which station, or where it headed, he would leave when he needed to. *Only* when he needed to.

And, between the creeping silences, he would observe each passenger, all the time listening to his jostling, fragmented thoughts. He watched for the stations too. He knew the exact time the train travelled between each stop, right down to the last minute. An advantage, he saw it, to allow him time for his assaults and to move around undetected.

But he never chose his victims. They would inadvertently choose themselves.

He would always wait until the last person remained on the train before making his move. It meant that person would be the *one*, although he wasn't always successful because sometimes, the last few people left the train together, leaving him alone in the carriage, stripped of purpose and full of adrenaline that would eventually spoil like red wine left in the heat. And he hated leaving empty handed.

But often there would only be one left. Just one.

And that's when his reflection often separated from the silence and slithered into the stillness, moving through the carriage, sniffing out the warmth of the last person left on the train, always separated from safety by distance and always imprisoned by a constricting silence.

When the train doors closed on the last person left, he would no longer be the hunched figure sitting alone, lost to his thoughts. He would come alive.

And that night he felt lucky.

He waited near the doors and watched as the last few people departed the train. The sliding doors closed and cool air wafted against his face as though to refresh him. He looked up, his worn arctic stare slicing through the swirling hush.

One person remained in the carriage, her back towards him.

He preferred it that way. Easier to take them.

He got up and moved down the coach, his sneakers cushioned against the soft vinyl floor; his presence protected and silenced.

He pulled a long nylon cord from his jacket pocket, readied it in his hands.

The darkness outside smothered the train, thick and murky against the windows, like an impregnable black wall.

He gazed at her, curious; the way she had pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail, revealing dainty gold earrings that dangled from the soft rounded shape of her ears. A slender neck nestled in a denim jacket. All pale, delicate young skin.

She seemed oblivious to his presence – lulled instead by the music through her earphones, her senses dulled.

He stood behind her seat, poised.

He knew the next station was six minutes away.

Fingers gripped the flex and in one swift, fluid movement he hooked the cord around the woman's neck and pulled it tight, slamming her head against the headrest and startling her.

The woman resisted, just as he expected – they always reacted to the shock – and she tried slipping her fingers beneath the rope to loosen the hold, anything to prevent strangulation, but he tightened his grip in response and drew the cord tighter, preventing her.

Strange sounds soiled the silence – sounds of stale air escaping her lips, the sound of the larynx bubbling and gurgling, the sound of the lungs hissing. The sound of a woman dying.

He turned then and glanced at her flailing reflection against the blackness outside. Legs thrust for a few moments against the lack of air, before she finally weakened and then became still. Even though she didn't

move, he knew she wasn't dead, not yet, so he kept up the pressure, stealing every particle of oxygen left in her body until her starved heart finally stopped beating.

The soporific sound of the train oozed through the deathly hush and enveloped him, prodded his thoughts.

The woman's tongue protruded, swollen with the blood that had caught in her head. Her eyes bulged slightly where the pressure had built up. At last, her hands slipped from the cord.

He let go.

The woman's head slumped forward, chin on chest. As though sleeping.

He checked for a pulse, there wasn't one.

He took in a slow, deep breath, ran a finger down her neck and felt the softness of her freshly dead skin; such carrion sentiment. His mouth almost twitched into a smile.

He coiled the cord away into his pocket and made his way to the doors. He relished the rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins, the sensation soaking his pores in sickly satisfaction, yet despite the torrent, his heartbeat remained steady and unmoved by fear or excitement or emotion. Not even perspiration inked his brow.

He took in another sweeping breath as though sucking cigarette smoke deep down into his lungs, let it soothe him. He felt slightly giddy, yet satiated.

For now.

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Deserted stations and darkness veiled him. He always wore a hood to shadow his whiskered face from CCTV cameras. He had travelled the Parkway so often over the years that he knew where all the cameras were located, knew when the security guards changed shifts or went home and knew when each station finally became deserted.

He lived and breathed riding the Parkway Circular.

There were times that he felt like a ghost, traversing life unseen, unheard and unknown, yet he felt at ease living a solitary existence somewhere in the shadows of the city, sleeping through the despair of



daylight hours and emerging only at night like some light-fearing demon. In truth, he was a ghost of his own making.

Except when riding the Parkway Circular at night.

The train rumbled into the darkness. No one would find the dead woman for many hours. She'd be riding the train undisturbed and alone in her carriage, passing station after station, yet never reaching her stop and never heading home.

But by sun up she'd be splashed across the news.

He didn't watch the news or read the papers. He wasn't interested in celebrity, notoriety or sensationalism. He cared only for anonymity and solace.

And the Parkway Circular provided just that.

He'd lost count of the number of travellers he'd silenced over the years. All he knew was how to feed the impulsive urges once the darkness descended. He'd been riding the train for so long that he didn't know how to stop. He didn't want to stop. Couldn't.

And so it had been for almost six years. Unlike an addiction, there was no need for him to do it every night – the urges didn't manifest all the time. Sometimes he would go weeks, even months without killing, because in truth, he knew he'd be caught in no time. No, he was smarter than that. He had to be careful, his anonymity depended on it, but of course, with each killing his unwanted notoriety grew and the media quickly dubbed him 'The Parkway Killer'. With the attention growing, it meant that the police were watching the trains and stations, sometimes boarding the trains in the hope of catching the mysterious serial killer, but he was always very careful when travelling, so the moment he sensed police presence he left the train and slunk back into the protective darkness like an elusive bogeyman.

He found it strange, however, that the public, rather than becoming vigilant to the threat of the Parkway Killer, had instead become nonchalant and unconcerned.

Cold air broke through his thoughts. He passed beneath an archway and descended the subway that ran beneath the station. He preferred the company of rats than the duplicitous company of people, favouring instead the shifting subterranean shadows rather than the dulled saffron sheen of street lights. He felt safe in the shadows.

The tips of his fingers still tingled; the sensation of pulling tight on the cord remained trapped beneath his skin, as though lodged like a splinter. It

was quickly followed by a cool numbness that crept up his legs, not unlike pins and needles, but rather than discomfort, he enjoyed the peculiar feeling.

Distant sounds floated on the air, carried from across the dense blackness of night. He emerged from the subway and ascended a grassy embankment. At the top of the hill he saw the fading lights of the train vanishing into the distance, its last passenger, lifeless, making her final journey.

He made his way through the darkness. His excited thoughts talked in tangled words, enveloped by a slight tinny hiss and he turned towards home.



Three weeks later he donned the dark hooded sweatshirt that he always wore and slipped into an approaching night full with cool moisture. He waited at the station in his usual spot near the stairs, away from the attention of the CCTV cameras, and scanned the large crowd mulling around on the station platform, waiting to catch a ride home from a night of fun and drinking in the city.

As much for ritual as for curiosity, he studied their faces, wondered if any of them would be the last one left on the train, burry eyed and fuzzy with alcohol, unwitting tenders just waiting to die for him with the cord snapped tight around the throat before riding the Parkway Circular like stranded ghosts unable escape reality.

He checked the time. It was half past one.

A low resonance hummed through the station. He knew that sound. The sound of the train skirting along the tracks in the distance, carried through the early morning drizzle. Distorted lights approached.

He fingered the cord in his pocket and felt the strong bond that it conjured. Sharpened images flashed through his head; glancing memories of the backs of heads or hands, the blur of shocked faces. He didn't always see the faces of his victims; sometimes he only ever saw the back of their heads.

The train doors opened and a handful of people stepped into the carriages. He counted three carriages, two less than during the day. He took

his place by the window and bowed his head. From beneath the hood he peered around the carriage.

Most people loitered near the doors – he knew they were only travelling a few stops, so he paid little attention to them during the journey from station to station, listening instead to the flood of voices in his head talking at him, through him, a collective cacophony constantly urging him. It wasn't until the last few revellers were left the train that he looked up, as though compelled to do so.

That's when he noticed the woman and the little girl with waist-length brown hair, their suitcases nearby. He could tell they were returning from a trip and were homeward bound because of the crumpled flight labels fixed around the handles on the suitcases.

They looked tired.

The only ones left on the train.

*How lucky*, he thought. Two for the price of one.

He surreptitiously peered through the glass panel into the next carriage. Empty. He knew the train would stop any moment at the next station and he rose from his seat and made his way down the aisle to the train doors. He didn't make eye contact with the woman and girl, in order not to arouse their suspicions or attention and pretended to wait for the train to stop.

Of course, he had no idea if the woman and girl would get off at the same stop – he simply had to hope that they didn't. If they did, he would simply alight from the train and disappear into the darkness, unfulfilled and disappointed. But if they didn't; if they were on for a few more stops, then he would take them both.

The train decelerated and finally came to a standstill.

The woman and girl remained seated, chatting to each other in lowered tones, despite no one else on the train.

The doors automatically opened. But he didn't leave, instead he deftly stepped back into the carriage and sat down, hidden by several rows of seats. The woman and girl were unaware of his presence.

The next station was twelve minutes away.

He pulled the cord from his pocket, readied it.

He had to think clearly; two people presented an unusual and rare dilemma – which one to take first? If he took the girl first, then the woman would fight back and try to protect her; he knew she'd cause him trouble.

That in turn would make it difficult to take her. But if he took the woman first, then the child would be easier to take – less resistance and less strength than a full grown woman. And besides, the child couldn't escape him; there was nowhere for her to run.

There was no further time to debate. The next stop was now less than ten minutes away.

Fuelled by a steely resilience, he stood and edged his way down the aisle, listened as the woman and girl talked about their trip.

He made the cord taut, hovered.

The little girl sensed something in her peripheral vision, movement; a shadow and she turned her head to see.

He immediately hooped the cord around the woman's neck, yanked hard.

Spooked, the girl screamed in strangled fear at first, then it turned to concern for her mother; her voice bounced from the curved surfaces inside the carriage and became lost and absorbed by the sound of the engine and the rush of the tracks. She instinctively reached up and beat his hands with tiny closed fists in a desperate attempt to get him to release the cord, but it had no effect.

The woman struggled against his strength and it surprised him; he had not expected it. His muscles and sinews reacted and he tightened the cord against her larynx.

Tears smeared the girl's face. 'Mommy!'

He was almost there; he could sense her fading.

Fear and desperation made the girl dig her nails into his flesh on the back of his hand. 'Leave her alone, get off her! Mommy!'

He was almost done.

The sight of her mother's swollen, reddened face drove terror into the girl's insides and she quickly realised it was no use trying to stop him. Instantly she fled to the door at the end of the carriage.

He saw her reach for the door sensor.

Although she couldn't escape anywhere, he didn't want her to alert the train driver; he simply couldn't let that happen.

He released the cord from the woman's neck. She flopped forward without a sound and fell to the floor. He ran after the girl; saw her running through the next compartment, heading for the train driver's door at the front of the carriages. He picked up speed, easily navigating the tight aisle.

Her screams reverberated around the carriage and rattled against his eardrums.

She pressed the door sensor to the last carriage, but panic clouded her and she stumbled and fell forward as the doors slid open.

He grabbed her ankle and dragged her back through the bulkhead. ‘Oh no you don’t.’ He straddled her, pinned her against the floor and unfurled the cord.

She kicked hard, breathless and overflowing with fear that she thought she would drown, but her efforts were ineffectual.

Instantly the cord tangled round her fine slender neck, tightening and pinching the delicate folds of skin.

She gulped down pockets of air, but it made no difference and she quickly weakened against him.

Frustration simmered in his veins, the voices in his head clamoured and the tumult made him pull the cord as tight as it could be without slicing through her flesh. Within moments the girl stopped struggling and became quite still, her eyes wide and stained with purple-tinted terror; her life slowly dissipating.

He waited a few seconds just to make sure she was dead, but then a new sound punctured his thoughts and startled him – the screech of brakes and the hard grind of metal against metal. The floor rumbled beneath him. He looked up at the empty carriage ahead.

Nothing.

Then he glanced over his shoulder to the carriage behind.

The woman was gone.

A terrible cold sensation trickled through his veins, chilled him.

*No, not possible...*

He got to his feet and raced back through the carriage, felt the sensation of the train rushing to a stop. He stared through a window to his left, but he couldn’t see any station. Nothing but sinister blackness confronted him. He knew then that the woman must have activated the emergency stop – he realised with maddening clarity that he hadn’t done the job off finishing her off properly – she’d regained her senses just enough press the stop button.

An unfamiliar sensation pooled in the pit of his stomach, one he rarely felt; one of panic, the unyielding lack of control. He had not planned for

such events, simply because the precise manner of his attacks negated the need for drastic actions.

Heartbeat quickened as he raced down the aisle. Movement caught his attention.

He saw her legs, sprawled, heard her gasping against the floor.

The train shook with such force that he had to hold onto a bar, but the momentum of the train shuddering to a stop threw him forward against a row of seats. Outside the window, smoke rose up from beneath the train, created by the friction of the brakes.

He figured he had just enough time to finish the woman and escape before the train driver made his way through the carriages to see who had pulled the emergency stop.

Perspiration licked his brow, stung him. He bent forward and grabbed the woman's hair. Despite her dulled senses she hit out at him – like a reflex – but he grabbed her wrist and managed to wrap the cord around her throat once again. This time there was little opposition and, already weakened, she swiftly succumbed against his strength.

“Hey!”

A new sound sliced through his jagged senses – the sound of the train driver's voice approaching from the left.

He yanked the cord from the woman's neck and, making sure his hood was pulled low across his face, he ran for the doors. He slapped the emergency button to pop the doors open.

The sound of clanking keys and footsteps permeated the carriage. “Stop right there...”

The doors slid open and he jumped from the train into the darkness, landed on the coarse ballast lining the tracks, the muscles in his thighs and calves absorbing the shock and rippling up the small of his back. The light cast from inside the carriage didn't stretch far, and he could see very little through the shifting maw, other than distant neon specks that glittered in tandem along the horizon, but he knew the train had stopped in the middle of what seemed like nowhere, stranded between stations.

From inside the carriage he heard the train driver's pitched voice, yelling into his radio.

The Parkway Killer stumbled across the tracks to the other side, reached a sheer wall of undergrowth and poplar trees. He grabbed the branches and tried to haul himself up, but he found the embankment too

steep and the loose dirt beneath his feet cascaded down to the bottom, taking him with it. He tried again, but it was just too sheer.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the train driver running down the carriages towards the front of the train. He looked back into the distance and the cavernous gloom that smothered the landscape. Hesitation gave way to his burgeoning thoughts. He calculated that it would be at least fifteen minutes by the time emergency services located the train and then navigated onto the tracks.

Time enough to finish what he'd started.

The voices in his head became louder.

He couldn't leave any witnesses.

He decided against fleeing and instead ran back towards the train. He climbed up to the open doorway, entered the carriage and made his way towards the driver's cab. Once again he pulled the cord from his pocket. He approached the doorway, muscles taut. The driver had his back to the narrow corridor, his voice trembling as he talked into the radio, the tone unmistakably distressed.

The Parkway Killer moved forward and a strange closeted silence enveloped him as he raised the cord.

The train driver noticed a hooded reflection in the windscreen. Like a demonic spectre. He spun round, gripped by fear.

The Parkway Killer reacted and pushed the cord against the driver's thick neck, making him stumble into the control panel. He pressed as hard as he could against the driver's windpipe, used his weight to pin him down while listening to the strange gurgling sound spilling from the man's quivering lips. The driver's eyes rolled in fleshy sockets and his grip loosened.

The Parkway Killer relented and pulled away, watched as the big man slipped from the control panel and slumped against the floor.

The killer stared at the control panel. Although he didn't fully understand the array of lights and switches and levers, he had a good idea how the train worked. He ran through the scenario in his head, figured it wasn't such a bad thing that if the train moved – it would travel away from the spot where the driver had reported the incident. That would delay the emergency services long enough to give him time to escape before the train accelerated out of control.

He ran back down the carriage, scooped up the lifeless little girl and half carried her to the doorway. He dropped her by the door and used her body to wedge the doors open. He then rushed back to the driver's cab and fumbled with the controls, until at last the engine rumbled to life again and the train began to edge along the track. He remained calm as he headed back through the carriage and returned to the woman's body.

The train gained momentum.

He dragged the woman's body to the door. He could just leave them both on the train, as he always did, but circumstances had changed and the police were hunting him. That meant there was considerable risk of discovery unless he could delay things enough to escape. By throwing the bodies of the woman and girl from the train, he figured it would hinder the cops just enough to allow him to slip away into the darkness, but, of course, nothing in life was certain.

The cool breeze channelled through the open door and washed against his face. He peered down at the tracks rushing past; blurred by the increasing speed of the train. He held his foot against the door to keep it open and plucked the girl from the floor. A few seconds later he threw her out of the door, watched as the blackness swallowed her little body.

He bent down and grabbed the dead woman's foot, dragged her towards the door. He hooked his hands beneath her armpits and lifted her. Although slender, she felt heavy in his arms and her dead weight strained his muscles. After a silent count of three, he heaved the woman through the doorway, saw her hit the gravel face first, before she vanished into the stifling blackness.

He took a second to regain his thoughts and his breath, and half knelt by the doorway.

Despite the fraught situation and the rise of panic, he had managed to kill three in a single night, the most he had ever achieved in any given evening and beneath the initial fizz of anxiety, the familiar gloopy sensation of satisfaction gradually began to quell any dread that he felt. Despite the panic, it had been worth it.

But now the prospect of escape filled his mind and it churned, heavy like vomit stuck in his stomach, although he wasn't entirely sure how he could leave the train without severely injuring himself. But if he didn't escape, he would inevitably be caught, he wouldn't be able to avoid it. That was the very last thing he wanted.



He would have to take the chance and jump. If he climbed down from the doors and balanced his centre of gravity, he could drop and hit the gravel with less force than if he jumped straight from the doorway. Besides, he had no choice. He couldn't stop the train, didn't want to, because he knew the cops would be waiting at one of the stations along the route and they'd track him down eventually if he stayed on board.

He knew he was too smart for them. He'd avoided capture for years. They couldn't even put a face to a suspect and he wasn't about to let them win.

But the one thing that drove fear into his heart, other than the prospect of being caught, was the fear that he would one day end up like his victims, endlessly riding the Parkway Circular like ghosts without purpose, trapped forever and never going home. That fear was always present.

He pushed aside such reticence and smiled instead at his good fortune – he'd killed three people in one go. But this time, it wasn't just his fingertips that tingled. The back of his neck, his shoulders and arms and all down his back pricked with the thrill of the kill.

He grinned.

He'd been right; he had been feeling lucky that night.

He poked his head from the doorway to take stock – perhaps he could recognise the lights of buildings or shapes of landmarks in the sea of blackness to determine where the train was. The wind rushed through his hair.

Lights, large and looming. A high pitched roar.

He remembered the lights for a split second. Bright, luminous and rushing toward his face. He remembered the air being sucked from around him. He remembered the awful sound screaming in his ears. Metal against metal.

A split second. That's all it took before the crunch of the other train shearing past ripped his head from his shoulders as though destroying a water balloon and the soft slick contents of his skull splattered across the doorway and floor and glass panels; pink and gleaming and coated with a thin seamy film of blood.

His headless body dipped forward – still clutching the cord – and slipped down between the two trains. Gravity sucked his limbs between the wheels, deftly ripping flesh from bone, the noise of both engines drowning out the crunching sound of his bones. It lasted five seconds before both

trains vanished in opposite directions into the blackness, leaving behind an unrecognisable vermillion stain across the tracks.

Strips of fabric and lumps of flesh lay strewn across a wide area, floating in warm puddles of dirt-stained blood. A sneaker lay between the rails, a severed foot still inside it. Nearby lay a hand torn from the wrist and half a leg ripped from the knee joint. The rest had been pulverised. The bits across the track were all that remained of the Parkway Killer.

The train lights sank into the distance. And just like all his victims before him, lumps of the Parkway Killer remained on board the train, another ghost without purpose, riding the Parkway Circular into the darkness, forever.

## Divorce

*Neil Leckman*

Sitting at the table, engulfed in confusion and sorrow, Sharon ate another bite of ice cream. She looked down at the fine china bowl, with the intricate drawings of dragons around its rim, a gift from an old exchange student for their wedding, marvelling at its complicated pattern. The overhead light reflected off the slowly melting ice cream, almost mesmerizing at that moment. She thought, "How funny that marriage is a lot like a bowl of ice cream, if left alone it slowly melts, losing its original form and becomes a stain."

She held the spoon up and looked at it, intricate fine silver, another wedding gift. Such fine intricate gifts for such a short-lived event. Steven had been the perfect husband at first, attentive and loving. Then, when his business folded, he became more abusive every day, verbally at first, then physically later. It was delightful to be able to peacefully sit here and eat some ice cream, a nice treat. She took another bite, then reached over and folded the lid shut on the ice cream container. She picked it up and walked out to the garage where the freezer was kept. She opened the door and set it inside, next to Steven.

Damn, even though he'd been a complete ass she was going to miss him.

She walked over to her silver Lexus, climbed in and started it. She remotely opened the garage door and slowly began to back out. Sharon stopped, rolled down the window and flicked a match into the pool of gasoline that covered a large part of the garage. Backing out she closed the garage door and drove down the street.

"Consider this a divorce!!" she said, never once looking back.

Behind her an orange glow filled the night sky, almost like the sunrise of a new day...

## **Pit of Darkness**

***Marija Elektra Rodriguez***

Her eyes fluttered open. They were heavy, painfully dragging against her clouded vision. She fought against the disorientation, the hazy, dream-like state that clouded her mind. Her lips were parched and her mouth was chalky, her tongue a swollen pulp of flesh between her teeth. Intuitively, she knew something was wrong and a pang of panic prickled the tiny hairs on the back of her neck. She tried to stand, but her body wouldn't comply. She lifted her left hand and then her right, hearing a metallic clink each time and feeling the cool brush of steel against her wrists. Her legs wouldn't move, no matter how hard she writhed.

She didn't understand. What was that thing, the long, white snake in her arm? Where were her clothes? A ripped shirt barely covered her breasts and her legs were completely naked, her sex hidden by frayed underwear. Her pulse beat violently and the sound of blood rushing through her ears whipped her into a state of alarm.

She was lying in a bed. Some sort of white fluid was feeding her intravenously through her left arm. The air was cold and damp, causing her skin to shiver violently. She didn't recognize the room. It wasn't a hospital and she knew that it wasn't her bed—but she couldn't remember what her own bed looked like. She couldn't remember a thing—not her name, her face, or what year it was.

She continued to survey her surroundings and nothing seemed familiar. Her first thought was that she was in some sort of medieval dungeon, with clay bricks for walls and a dirt floor. It was deep underground, where no light could permeate, a subterranean chamber dug into the earth. Dirt stairs were carved out of the wall opposite her, but the room was so dark that she couldn't see where they ended. They seemed to disappear into the darkness, ascending into the unknown blackness.

A flicker of light caught her attention. She noticed a small table in a corner of the room, decorated as though it were some kind of religious altar. Thick crimson candles were scattered across a black satin covering. Some of the candles were new, some were little more than melted pools of blood-like wax. There was a small gold chest in the center of the altar, it caught

the dim candlelight, shimmering with a faint, haunting glow. She wondered what horrible things were locked inside.

Directly behind the altar hung a large mirror, the frame elaborately decorated with gold and ivory, carved with exquisite detail. The mural showed a brutal battle scene, the figures of men on horseback with swords and spears murdering each other, bodies entwined in battle. At the pinnacle of the frame was a young woman. Her body was almost entirely naked, her arms crossed over her breasts. A bejeweled belt hid her sex and covered the tops of her alabaster thighs, falling into a sharp 'V' between her long legs. She was surrounded by golden flames, the fire wrapping about her until she was indistinguishable from the destruction of the battle scene.

The image was intensely disturbing; whoever worshipped at that altar praised destruction and death. It sent a brief thrill of disgust through her body.

Her eyes searched the floor despondently, tears burning against her cheeks. It was then that she noticed the large hole dug into the ground in front of the altar. A shovel lay near it, tossed innocuously by the side of a pile of dirt. The darkness obscured her vision, causing the hole to blend into the shadows. Despite her confused state she realized exactly what it was.

A grave.

Her throat constricted and the air was trapped in her lungs. The walls seemed to rush toward her, suffocating her. She tried to focus her vision, to calm her palpitating heart and hysterical breath. The harder she stared at the mirror the more disoriented she felt, until it became a horrifying thing, a black pool of emptiness reflecting her death. Her murder. Waves of intense dizziness hit her mind, making her feel as though she were falling, as though the ground had disappeared beneath her.

*Where am I? Who did this to me?*

The rancid air jolted her out of her delirium. There was the smell of mold mixed with something else, something indistinguishable. It was like the scent of musk, almost sweet. She breathed a little more deeply and involuntarily gagged. Not musk—it was decay.

There was something rotting in the basement with her.

She held her breath and raised her hand to cover her lips. Her hand stopped short midway. She tried again but she couldn't connect her fingers to her mouth. Her hands were chained to the bed.

“No!” The word escaped her lips. She pulled harder, again and again tugging at the metal clasp and chain. Her blood pumped violently through her limbs, electricity coursing through her veins.

Then she saw the burns, the horrible scars on the inside of her arms, her fingers, her thighs. Some of the scars were fresh, still raw and the color of aubergine. Others were much older and had healed, distorted pools of flesh blending into her olive skin.

“How long have I been down here?” she whimpered, her voice a crackled sob through bloodless lips.

“Please be quiet, please! He’ll hear you.” The frightened voice of a small child cut short her thoughts.

Her eyes darted wildly across the darkened room, looking for the child, but her vision was still hazy, her eyelids heavy with delirium.

Then she spotted him. He was in a corner, small and frightened, his dirty knees tucked against his chest, his arms wrapped around them. She couldn’t see his entire face; his lips were buried against his thin arm, his eyes hidden by shadows. Tears had washed away slivers of dirt from his cheeks.

“Please, please don’t make him angry,” he pleaded, his fragile voice quivering between sobs. He bit the sleeve of his shirt, stifling the whimpers that fluttered from his lips.

“Make who angry? Where are we?” Her voice was hoarse, almost inaudible. She was unsure if she had spoken aloud or merely thought the words in her mind. She coughed, swallowed, and tried again. The child shook violently and didn’t respond.

“What’s your name?” she whispered, trying to soften her voice and sound reassuring, but her parched throat made the words abrasive, almost brutal.

His large dark eyes looked at her with alarm, with fear. He stood, wiped at the messy blonde curls that had fallen into his eyes and carefully walked toward her. His small, naked feet softly thudded against the bare dirt floor beneath him. Standing shyly at the side of her bed, he touched her gently, avoiding the burns on her shoulder. She guessed his age at six, perhaps seven years old. His jewel-black eyes searched her features imploringly, and a faint flutter of recognition stirred in her mind, but she couldn’t quite place him.

“Don’t you remember me, Mama?”



It was cyanide. That thing in her vein. Or some other kind of poison diluted with her intravenous fluid. Not enough to kill her, but enough to incapacitate her, to keep her in a perpetual dream-like trance. The smell of rot had roused her from another brief bout of unconsciousness. She wiggled her toes, her fingers. Her legs were finally starting to respond. She repeated the small movements, but they seemed so burdensome, so unnatural.

The child was sitting on the edge of her bed, his hand still on her shoulder, so light it could have been a feather. The tears welled in his eyes, then spilled over and snaked down his small, hollow cheeks.

The wooden ceiling above them shuddered suddenly, and it sent a rain of dust and dirt down around them.

“Daddy’s home,” the child whispered, mouthing the words so quietly that she barely heard what he said.

Fear bubbled in her stomach, making her feel ill. Her throat filled with bile and her body convulsed to vomit, but nothing was expelled. She tasted acid in her mouth and it felt as though dried blood had crusted her lips. She tried to wipe at her face but failed; the chain was too short and it made a loud banging sound as she repeatedly tried to free her hand.

The metallic sound of the chains scared the boy, who jumped off the bed in a fluid, cat-like motion. He scurried back to the corner of the basement, his small body disappearing into the blackness.

The basement door opened slowly and there was the heavy thud of feet against the stairs.

His legs were the first thing she saw. There was something horrible in the sight, the body half-hidden, shrouded in darkness with just the legs visible. Long, muscular legs, wrapped in black pants, the kind that belonged to an athlete. He descended slowly, the light revealing his form in small segments—the lean torso covered in a tight-fitted shirt and the tanned arms that held a small collection of knives wrapped in cloth, their silver blades jutting from his fingers like razors.

His face was unremarkable, so plain that if she had passed him on the street she wouldn’t have looked twice, except for his scar. A horrible, twisted piece of flesh snaked across his right jawbone, distorting his skin from chin to ear. It looked as though it had been melted, acid poured

directly onto his flesh. It hardened his features. His small mouth was locked in a harsh line and his black eyes were like stones in their sockets.

He walked toward her, his boots kicking the earth into small plumes of dust and she couldn't help but think that this was where it would all end, where he would murder her, bury her in that foul-smelling dirt.

She expected him to speak, to explain what he wanted with her, but he didn't utter a word. He threw the knives on a silver tray near her bed, the loud clank of metal making her muscles clench involuntarily.

He walked toward the altar, inhaling a long, deep breath as he did so. He seemed to take pleasure in the hideous smell; his shoulders slackened slightly and his nails dug into his fists so that his knuckles were white and bulbous against his flesh. He opened the golden box and uttered words that she couldn't distinguish, but they sounded foreign, perhaps Latin or Italian.

It terrified her to watch him before the altar; mesmerized by whatever it was he had hidden in that box. She could see his reflection in the mirror, a distorted flash of black eyes and scarred skin against a pool of darkness. He turned to face her and his gaze lingered on the hole in the ground, the crudely dug grave, as though he contemplated what would happen next.

Smiling briefly, he walked toward her, watching as her battered body writhed against the dirty mattress. He took pleasure in seeing her squirm, in hearing the chains that bound her arms and legs clatter like crystal bells against the bars of the bed.

The man placed the small golden box on the metal tray and then selected a scalpel from his knife collection.

"No! No!" she shrieked, her muscles tensing with fear as the man cut into her thigh.

"Be still, or this will take me twice as long!" he barked, the spit foaming at the corners of his mouth.

A stab of pain shot through her right leg. Her body convulsed and she involuntarily jerked forward, the motion cut short by her shackles.

He dug the scalpel into her flesh and then inserted his fingers under her skin. He probed her leg, his nail scratching at her bone. She howled in agony and black stars danced before her vision.

"Tell me why you did it!" he spat the words at her, his face so near she could smell his putrid breath, see the yellow stains on his teeth. "I want to know why! Why me? Why my family?" His screams blended with her cries as he twisted his finger, scraping at her thigh muscle.



There was a tearing sensation deep within her leg and he finally pulled out a thin piece of pulpy flesh covered in blood. He held it up to his eye and examined it. A hideous smile crept across his lips, and his face lit up with pleasure.

“This is a ligament from your leg,” he said nonchalantly as he placed the gelatinous flesh on the tray near his knives. “The human body has hundreds of such ligaments. I will tear every single one from your flesh unless you tell me why!” The small muscles in his jaw bulged as he screamed the words, his body shaking with a brief, intense spasm of fury.

She said nothing, unsure how to respond. Her mind was a jumbled mess; she didn't know her own name, let alone her captor or why he was screaming at her.

*He's deranged, she thought, the realization filling her with terror. He's had some kind of psychotic breakdown and thinks I'm to blame for whatever horrible things have happened to him.*

Angered by her silence, he reached into his pocket and retrieved a small purple vial. He poured a clear liquid directly onto her open wound. A sickening smell filled the air, like burnt meat, it caused her to gag, the odor hitting her before she felt the pain. Her flesh was on fire, the skin of her thigh burning with intense pain. It was some kind of acid, melting her thigh into a messy pool of red flesh.

Her body went into shock. She began to shake and broke out in a cold sweat as she fought the urge to black out.

He laid his hand upon her forehead and wiped the matted hair from her eyes. She felt violated, disgusted. She cried bitterly and tried to wiggle out of his grasp.

“I'm not done with you yet,” he whispered, grabbing her by the chin and staring deep into her eyes.

“Please, please let me go.” She struggled to form the words, her voice shaking, her vision blurred with tears, with terror.

“Let you go?” He laughed sarcastically, his eyes glaring with disgust. “Like you let those children go?”

He snatched the golden box from the tray and thrust it into her face, pulling back the lid. The stench of rot flooded her nostrils and she squeezed her eyes shut, terrified of what lay inside.

“Look!” he spat, the anger making his voice tremble. “Look at what you've done! Open your eyes or I'll carve them out of your sockets!”

Reluctantly, she forced her eyes to open, the smell of rot causing her stomach to spasm. It took her a moment to interpret the contents of the box, the horrible things that were hidden inside.

They were remains. The rotted, desiccated remains of tiny fingers. Children's fingers. Three of them. One still had a small signet ring, the type a young girl would wear.

"Why did you do it?" His tone had changed. He was no longer angry; he sounded wounded, defeated. "Why did you murder those children?" A tear slipped down his mutilated cheek.

Hanging his head, he covered his eyes with his dirty fists and his rigid body faintly shook. "We've been at this for days, and you still won't talk."

Instantly, the anger possessed him again. "Why did you break into my house all those years ago, and take my son? Pour acid on my face to incapacitate me? Murder my wife? What sick ritual do you perform at this altar?" He flung his hand in the direction of the mirror, his features contorted with rage.

She couldn't respond. She had no idea what he was talking about.

He unlocked her chains, one by one, starting with her mutilated leg. She tried to kick him, to pound him with her fists, but her body was weak and she could barely raise her arms.

"You should have murdered me, too. I never understood why you didn't. The three other families you targeted, you always murdered the father before you took the children. Why leave me alive? Why me?"

He lifted her from the bed and carried her in his arms, tearing the drip from her vein so that blood gushed from her flesh in a crimson fountain.

"You kept the children alive for years, raising them as your own, only to murder them when they turned seven. Why?" His eyes burned into her, but she remained silent.

He stood before the grave, the crudely dug pit and she realized that no one would ever find her remains down there. She fought against him, trying to twist her body out of his grip, but she was too weak and her movements were ineffectual.

"I'll never get an answer from you," he whispered, his voice hollow and defeated. "But the thing I can't live with—the thing that really burns my blood—is my son still thinks you're his mother." His eyes glanced toward the shadow-drenched corner of the basement where the young child was hidden.

*Of course, she thought, they have the same stone-black eyes.*

His arms relaxed and he dropped her into the hole, into the rotted earth. She hit the ground with a moist thud and the smell of decay intensified, becoming unbearable.

“You buried them here, in your basement, where their families would never find them. Why?” He roared the words at her one final time, and her body shook violently with fear. She opened her mouth to scream, to yell that he was sick and deranged, but the air choked in her throat and an unsteady whimper escaped her lips instead.

“Massimo!” the man ordered and the blonde-haired child scurried to his side. They looked down into the grave together as she groaned in pain, her limbs twisted beneath her at awkward angles.

“This woman is not your mother. She's a murderer. She hides her sins in this pit of darkness.”

“Yes Papa,” the boy whispered obediently, his voice shaking with fear.

“Now help me bury the bitch so we can finally go home.”

## **Preston's Last Investigation**

### ***Chad Case***

Preston Hynes stood atop the staircase, paralyzed with fear. Moments before, his flashlight had given out, leaving him cloaked in a blanket of darkness.

"Kendra," he called to his colleague. "Where are you?"

She didn't answer.

Cold sweat started to bead on Preston's forehead. His heart pounded twice its normal rate. "Come on, Preston," he whispered to himself, trying to settle his jittery nerves. "Get it together. You've done this countless times before."

He wiped the perspiration from his brow and thought about his eleven year career. He was the founder and lead investigator of the Kentucky Ghost Hunter Squad. To date, he and Kendra had explored hundreds of haunted locations and investigated numerous ghost sightings but he'd never been this terrified before. They were at the home of Dray Ramirez, a notorious psychopath that butchered over thirty people during his life. The house had remained empty since Dray's death in 1983. However, the two-storey Victorian was a hotspot for paranormal investigators and ghostly activity.

"Kendra," Preston repeated in a weak, dry voice. "I think we need to get out of this place." He paused, waiting on a response that didn't come. "There's no ghost here."

Just then, Preston's flashlight kicked on, illuminating an eerie glow down the staircase. Preston jumped as he saw the translucent body of a tall man standing at the bottom of the steps. It was Dray Ramirez. His eyes were wide and his smile was venomous. In one hand, Dray held a bloody meat cleaver. In the other, he held Kendra's severed head.

As Dray started to walk up the flight of stairs, Preston's flashlight went out again. Frozen with fear, Preston began to panic and the darkness filled with screams.

## **Just After Midnight**

*Kevin L. Jones*

It was there again, a large black monstrous eye staring in at him through the second storey window. The huge shadowy thing's breath fogged the glass. This was the second night in a row that the horrid apparition had made its appearance just after midnight. As he sat in his bed, he had been able to hear its footsteps approach his isolated mountain top cabin where he had been taking a break from the madness of city life. With each of the creature's terrible footfalls the very earth itself shook. It made no attempt to gain entrance into the cabin. It seemed content with merely leering in at him. As he lay in bed trembling, too terrified to move or even breathe, he wondered why it did not smash its way in and devour him. The shadowy beast must be enormous. Why did it not just take him and have done with it? Perhaps it was curious about what sort of a thing the tiny cowering man in the little house was. Maybe it had not laid eyes on a human before. Whatever the reason, he was glad that it did not take him. As he lay with the covers tightly drawn about him, he cursed himself for not fleeing the cabin after the creature had made its first appearance. He had stayed mainly to prove to himself that something so impossible could not have occurred but here he was staring into its huge terrible eye yet again. If he lived through the night he vowed that he would return to the city and never again venture into the countryside where monsters still prowled in the darkness. As he continued to gaze upon the hideous eye his heart beat faster and faster. He sweated profusely. He could not breathe. He clutched at his throat as he gasped for air, whimpering softly before fainting.

When he awoke the dreaded apparition was gone and the glorious rays of the morning sun shone through the window where the beast had gazed at him. He had paid for three more days and nights in advance for the cabin but he did not care. He would not stay there even for another hour. He wanted to get as far away as he could from the lonely hilltop and the surrounding haunted woods. He hastily packed his bags, threw them into his car and sped from this place.

Upon returning to his small cramped apartment in the heart of the decaying dirty city, he smiled gratefully. Only a scant few days ago he had wanted nothing more than to get away from all of this but as he stared at the

smog filled sky, he thought the urban sprawl that surrounded him had never looked so good. Exhausted from the last two harrowing nights, he entered his apartment and went straight to sleep. When he awoke it was just after midnight. At first he thought that he was dreaming. He could once again hear the thunderous footsteps approaching. He clamped his hands firmly over his ears, trying to shut out the hated noise but it was no use. His whole apartment building shook. Car alarms were set off. Dogs howled in the night. He shook his head in disbelief. He was miles away from the cursed hilltop but somehow the hideous black beast had found him. His heart pounded furiously in his chest as his eyes were drawn almost against his will towards the open bedroom window. His gaze was met by the sight of the terrible eye. Finally he could stand the horror no more and his body began to shut down. As he breathed his last he smiled gratefully, he had escaped the creature's ghastly penetrating gaze. Never again would he have to face the black beast that filled his nights with terror. For him there would be no more just after midnights.

## O Ye of Little Faith

*Brian Barnett*

Once the sky faded into deeper shades of purple over the tree tops of the Daniel Boone National Forest, the nocturnal creatures made themselves known. The night air was filled with crickets, rustling leaves and a crackling fire. Buck Harrelson fed the fire with more sticks he had collected from around the camp site.

He had just finished telling his favorite lunatic murderer story. It was the one about the masked man who had escaped the mental ward, lived in the woods and murdered all those who encroached on his territory. The story always made him swell with pride when the boys' eyes lit up in fearful anticipation. His son, Percy, always requested it. Percy knew it by heart, but he loved to watch other boys cower in fear after they had heard it. They would watch the darkened trees, ready for a crazed man to run toward them with an ax overhead.

The new boy did not cower at all, however. He sniffed, gave a brief grin and put another marshmallow on his stick. His name was Adrian, a new friend of Percy's.

"What's wrong, Adrian?" Buck asked while applying another layer of bug spray to his legs, "Not scared, are you?" He held a flashlight under his chin to cast a creepy, shadowed face.

"No, I like scary stories. I've just heard lots of them and most are the same."

Percy was quick to his father's defense, "Those probably aren't half as scary as the ones my dad tells."

Adrian shook his head and chuckled. "My dad tells some real good ones. All of them are true too." He tilted his head, while he absently stared into the flickering flames. Finally, he added, "One might just come true any minute now, in fact." A sinister grin spread across his face.

"Let's hear it!" Buck clapped his hands together and sat jubilantly by the fire. Whenever he anticipated scary stories he was more like child than an adult. He was already giddy, just by the mood that Adrian had set for his story.

Percy slid a little closer to his father, slightly off-put by the matter-of-fact way that Adrian had stated that it might come true. His approach to

telling ghost stories was creepy, he admitted silently to himself.

Adrian blew out a blue flame from his wilting marshmallow. “Are you sure you want to hear it? Most people get too scared and beg me to stop before it’s done.” The orange flicker on his face highlighted a devilish glint in his eye.

“Fire away!” Buck smiled. He nudged Percy as he chortled. Percy did not return his gleeful disposition. He clamped his jaw shut and forced away the chill that had begun to rise up his spine.

“His coming will be swift and without warning. He has been planning His return for centuries. But only when His messenger relays His word to one who is truly faithful, will He return.”

“I take it that you’re supposed to be ‘*His*’ messenger, huh?” Buck asked while biting into a scorched hotdog, eyes still intently focused on Adrian.

“Yes. But so far, I have yet to come across anyone with enough faith to allow me to finish His word. I am always stopped short by people who turn out to be faithless cowards. Only when a person is truly faithful will he or she allow me to finish. I mean, what would they have to fear, right?”

Buck stopped chewing. He nodded slowly and narrowed his eyes. He scanned the tops of the darkened trees, perhaps searching for the meaning of what Adrian had just said.

“When He emerges, the seas will boil, the rivers will become like blood and the wind will whisper His name.” Adrian looked to the trees, almost as if cueing the wind.

The tree limbs swayed heavily as a strong gust howled through the leaves. The fire flickered heavily and righted itself as the wind died down.

“Whoa! *Spooky!*” Buck chuckled. He looked over to Percy and pried for a confirmation. He nudged his elbow, “Huh? Huh?”

Percy just clinched his skewer tighter and slid a little closer to Buck. He tried not to look as scared as he felt.

Adrian continued, “The animals will be the first to sense Him. They will run in great scores, carrying the diseases that He brings with Him. They will spread them quickly across the land. Afterward, the silence will be deafening.”

Again, Adrian peaked over his shoulder and with a devious half-grin, seemed to be expecting something. A small herd of deer weaved through the shadowy underbrush just beyond the trees. A swarm of bats and birds



fluttered away in the same direction, black fluttering shadows against the night sky. The crickets and other night bugs grew silent.

“Goodness, that’s a little odd,” muttered Buck. He hesitated and looked down at his watch, “What time is it getting to be?”

“You’re not going to stop me in the middle of the story, are you?” Adrian challenged. His devious glare stopped Buck cold.

Buck looked over to Percy’s frightened, round eyes. “Well, just a little longer, I guess. We don’t want to wait too long before going to bed. We’ll miss out on some good fishing in the morning!” He nudged Percy, who didn’t respond. Instead he began biting his fingernails feverishly.

“It’s not much longer, I assure you.” Adrian stared into the fire again.

His eyes seemed strange. Almost completely black, Percy noticed. He assured himself that it was a trick from the shadows. He gave a feigned yawn. “I sure am getting tired. I hope this doesn’t take too much longer.” He exaggerated, trying not to sound as terrified as he knew he appeared.

“The last sign, the one that only few will see, comes soon after.” Adrian continued staring into the fire. His black eyes were fixated deep within the writhing flames. “Immense black clouds will roll across the sky, blotting out any and all natural light. Impossibly large thunderstorms will produce fire and brimstone, instead of rain and lightning.”

In the distance, clouds began to roll across the sky. They swirled, oil-like, over the horizon. A murmur of thunder announced their impending arrival.

“Dad!” Percy’s eyes darted to the clouds as they crept across the sky and closer to the campsite.

“I see them,” Buck assured him, “Adrian, that’s quite enough.” Buck’s voice was weak.

Adrian continued, either not hearing or not caring.

“People will run, but they will have nowhere to hide. Impish creatures will descend from the clouds and seek them out. They will come on black, leathery wings, as wide as a condor’s. They will bring the smell of His world with them.”

A sulfuric stench swept across the campsite. A veil of darkness covered the three of them. The only light was from the waning flicker of their struggling campfire. The continual thunderous growl of the clouds grew steadily closer.

Percy began to cry. He slipped into his sleeping bag and covered his head, afraid of what might come out of the clouds.

“Adrian! That’s enough! We’ve heard enough!” Buck shrieked over the odious roar of the impending clouds.

Adrian seemed to jump. He looked over at Buck’s panicked face and Percy’s quivering sleeping bag and smiled.

The clouds dissipated from the horizon as quickly as they had appeared. The campfire grew stronger and the sound of the chirping crickets returned.

“You two got further than most.” He popped another blackened marshmallow into his mouth. “O ye of little faith,” he chuckled.

## Hell's People

*J.R. Roper*

The narrow stairs creaked as Jake descended, stretching his arms up after his long afternoon nap.

"This fire won't tend itself," Great Aunt Helen called. "You slept all day."

Jake tramped through the dining room and into the kitchen. Old Helen was sitting at the table smoking a hand rolled cigarette which smelled like it'd been laced with herbs. She'd said the store-bought were too weak and the thick smoke was enough to convince Jake that she was right.

"Sorry," Jake said. When he'd agreed to help Helen for the summer, he was going on his parents' description, having never met her himself. Kind. Neat and tidy. Bakes the best pies. That woman was long gone.

Aunt Helen flared her eyes and took a long draw. She exhaled slowly and said, "Now what you doing?"

Jake added a few split logs to the kitchen stove. "Taking a run before dark."

"Never liked running for fun. Never understood the reason."

Jake refilled his Aunt's coffee cup and poured himself a small one. "It's how I've always escaped."

Aunt Helen looked out the window. "Escape from what?"

"Normal life."

She leaned toward him, her purple veined hand nearly touching his. "Should never wish to *escape* normal life."

Something about the sharpness of the word 'escape' sent Jake's skin crawling. He didn't hate Crawfordsville. He was just bored. Even if he moved to the city after graduation, he'd never leave his family permanently. He'd visit and return with Molly and the kids for holidays. Molly. He'd always envisioned a future with her.

"I just want to live a little." Jake sipped his coffee.

Her face tensed and she looked like she wanted to say something.

Jake downed his cup. "Need anything before my run?"

She licked her flaky lips and took a draw.

Jake nodded and exited through the screen door. He sat on the steps to tighten his shoes.

“Jake, stay on the main roads,” she called from inside.

“What?”

“Stay on the main roads!” she yelled. “Or you’ll be leaving soon!”

Hell, yeah, sign me up to leave, he thought. “Okay, will do.” This place was more Podunk than Crawfordsville. What’s the worst that could happen? Chased by an angry Hereford? He was twenty-two, not twelve. Jake went down the steps and began jogging down the dirt driveway.

He made his way toward the main road. Main only in the sense that it was paved and had yellow lines down the center, freshly painted a decade ago. An old farmhouse was the only other place on the lane; overgrown with weeds and missing window panes, abandoned. The sun was nearing the horizon, but the air was still thick and stale. Jake felt sticky before reaching the road.

Indiana was flat. Kentucky was not. To the left rolled small hills. Right was steeper and would be more difficult. Perfect, less time with the old lady. This was only his first week with her. At this rate the entire summer wasn’t going to happen. One thousand dollars wasn’t worth it. If she’d been the woman his parents had remembered, maybe, but not this batty complainer.

Jake clung to the small shoulder of the road as a truck passed. The driver didn’t slow or even give him a small berth. He could feel the driver’s stare of disdain. The thought of running or walking somewhere was foreign here and the lack of a suitable shoulder was proof. It hadn’t been designed for anything but trucks. That was it—trucks. And this one coated the air with burning oil and diesel.

After about twenty minutes, Jake stopped at a fork in the road. To the right continued the main road; to the left a seldom used gravel road stretched without a house in sight. What could happen? He’d be safe from drivers. Aunt Helen would never know. And if she did find out, Jake didn’t give a damn.

Gravel slipped beneath his strides as he adjusted to the terrain. The scenery changed as he ran. Hills flattened slightly and forest gave way to fields. Dead fields where crops hadn’t been planted for years. To his right an old barn sunk into the ground and a grey wooden house stood next to it. As he passed the house someone called out.

Jake’s forehead became hot with sweat. He slowed and looked back. A man stood from his porch chair and waved. Jake stopped and rested his

hands on his hips. "Hey there," he called back.

"Where you headed, sonny?"

"Just on a jog. Enjoying the back roads."

"Well. If you hear hissing, it's best you turn around."

Hissing? Jake studied the man unsure of what to make of him. "Got it. Have a nice day."

The man sat back down.

Jake ran on. The old man had to be crazy.

Minutes later, a shoddy looking mobile home broke the monotony of barren field. Jake didn't want to stop so soon and look like a coward to the man on the porch, but it was growing dark and Aunt Helen would need him soon enough. Before reaching the mobile home, Jake stopped for a stretch and a short break. The moment he bent down to touch his toes, something scurried in the ditch. More movement in the field.

A low hiss from behind. And another from the front. Cats. Jake's armpits prickled with cold sweat. What the hell were cats doing out here? He was tired but he could outrun cats. No, he didn't need to run.

Jake moved to the middle of the road, scanning the sides for a stick, but picking up decent sized stones as he went. He expected he'd invaded their territory or something. They'd leave him be once he retreated toward the main road.

A loud hiss sent a shiver down the backs of his arms. It hadn't come from behind, but ahead to his left. Jake readied a stone and picked up speed. A large brown and black cat crept out of the weeds and stared at him. Then a ginger from the other side.

Jake stared back. Their eyes were wild and cold. Tails flicked back and forth and more were moving through the ditch and field on both sides. Jake threw a stone at one, missing to the right.

The cat bared sharp yellow teeth. *Shit*. Jake threw another stone and started to run. His legs began to jelly. He never sprinted mid run, only at the end when he could collapse. The house and barn were ahead. The old man would know what to do.

Something hit Jake's foot and he stumbled, placing a hand on the ground to avoid face planting. A sharp pain cramped his calf. He kicked with his spare foot and sent a cat flying. Hisses and growls surrounded him. A gang of cats waited ahead and another closed in from behind. There had to be fifty little bastards.

Warmth ran down the back of his leg. *Blood*. The snarls grew louder. The cats moved closer. Some crouched, ready to pounce. Claws sunk into his back. He spun. Then his side stung.

Jake hollered and swung with all his might, his skin pulling and splitting as he flung his attackers away. A horn and crunching gravel ended the attack.

“Get in!” the man said.

Jake dove for the door and the truck pulled away as he slammed it shut. The man rolled up his window and turned the wheel, spinning them back toward his house.

“Watch this.” He tossed his cap on the seat and leaned forward.

They picked up speed and swerved at cats as they moved on, scaring them but not hitting any.

Jake drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Thank you.”

“They are feral cats. They’d have finished you, boy.”

“Why doesn’t someone do something about them?”

The man rubbed his beak-like mouth and shook his head. “Those cats disappear. Damn things. No one could rid the area of them. Here for good, they are.”

They slowed as they approached the weathered house and barn.

“My aunt lives on Stony Lane,” Jake said.

“That’ll have to wait. Your scratches need tending. All sorts of disease on them mangy things.”

Couldn’t trust strangers. Not after what Aunt Helen said. But shit, this guy’d just saved him. They pulled up to the house. The old man looked at him, his blue-grey eyes intense. “Just be a few minutes. Then I’ll take you to that Auntie’s house.” His jowls nearly disappeared when he smiled.

Jake waited on the porch while the old man went inside. The bites in his calf hurt the worst, but the scratches stung too. He lifted his shirt to find several nasty scores on his lower back and his side. He peered into the nearby field for any sign of the cats but the fallow fields were still and the road empty. Moments later the man joined him.

“Have a seat. Those cats won’t come near this place. Trust me.”

“What’s your name, sir?”

The man chuckled. “No need to call me sir. Bill Hawken is my name. And you?”

Jake removed his shirt to get his wounds tended and get back to his Aunt's. "Jake Leslie."

"Well, Mr. Leslie, this is going to hurt like hell." Bill took a handful of a yellowish salve and smeared it onto Jake's calf.

Jake winced and clenched his jaw. It felt like large needles had been inserted into his leg and injected him with alcohol. The scratches hurt slightly less, but it was a pain he wouldn't soon forget. Bill wrapped the larger wounds with bandages, adding a bit of pressure and driving the salve in deeper.

"Now you're right as rain," Bill said as he handed Jake his t-shirt ruined with holes and blood stains.

"You were right. That hurt."

"Want something to take the edge off?" Bill arched his eyebrows.

Jake shook his head even though he wanted a drink.

"Come on. Made it myself. Not that cheap stuff from the store. It'll numb the pain, sure."

Jake shook his head again, but Bill pulled a bottle from underneath his chair along with two cloudy glasses and filled both to a double shot. Jake took the glass.

"Bottoms up, sonny." Bill clinked his glass against Jake's and downed the contents as if it were water.

Jake drew the glass to his lips. The alcohol burned his nostrils. "Potent stuff."

Bill nodded. "Not for pansies."

Jake's heartbeat pulsed in the hand that held the glass. "Death to the cats," he said triumphantly as he poured the liquor down his throat. His throat and insides burned as if a real flame had lit. Jake fought back a cough, determined not to be outdone by an old-timer.

"How can I repay you—for the help?" Jake sputtered.

Bill's face twisted like he was fighting back a smile. "No need to worry about that. You'll help me when the time comes."

Jake's heart pounded against his ribcage. He had no reason to distrust Bill, but something about the look on his face triggered an alarm inside his body.

"I'd better get back. Don't want my aunt worrying."

"Yes, of course." Bill stared into the field for a moment before leading the way to his truck.

The near silent ride to Aunt Helen's seemed to take forever. Jake had run farther than he'd thought.

As Bill neared the house his eyes narrowed. "How long have you known her?"

Jake didn't understand why it mattered. "I don't, really. I'm staying with her for the summer."

Bill nodded. "I expect she'll show her true colors soon enough. When that happens, come find me."

Jake stared blankly for a second before opening the door and hopping out. "Thanks again." He slammed the door and made for the house. Could she get worse? And why would Bill care to help him?

Bill u-turned and tore down the driveway, squealing his tires on the main road.

Jake's legs seemed to be burning worse than before and the second he entered the house his great aunt's eyes grew wide and she moved quickly toward him. "Where have you been?" She sniffed the air and stared at his blood streaked shirt and the bandage on his calf.

"I ran into some trouble on my run and—"

"I told you to stay on the main roads!" Her eyes were dark, like glossy black stones, her stature crouching instead of hunched.

"I'm sorry, I..." Jake's forehead broke into hot sweat. He didn't know what to say. He was an adult for Christ sake and didn't need a babysitter.

"Well, what happened to you?" She sniffed him again and stared at the bandages.

"It was cats. They surrounded me and I—"

Helen held up a hand to silence him. She moved close and her rank breath mingled with the smell of dirty hair "What did you drink?"

"Bill Hawken helped me. Gave me a little something to ease the pain."

Helen's eyes widened.

Every root of hair on Jake's head tingled. "What? What's wrong?"

"It doesn't matter, boy." Helen's shaky hands pulled a cigarette from behind her ear and a lighter from her pocket. She lit it and took a long draw. "Let's go and see to those cats."

Jake's stomach knotted. "I don't want to go back there."

"We need to cleanse the area, boy." Helen stuck the cigarette between her lips and led the way out into the early night, grabbing a shovel from the



side of the house and placing it in the back seat of her old car before sliding into the driver's seat. The car door creaked as Jake opened it and got in.

His legs continued to burn and his stomach jolted with sharp pain. "Whose cats are they?" he asked.

Helen switched on the lights as they pulled onto the road and stared ahead in silence. Could she have been worried about him? It didn't make sense since she didn't even seem to like him.

Minutes later they turned down the dirt road, passed Bill's place and entered the driveway of the mobile home.

"Someone lives here?" Jake tapped his aunt on the shoulder. "You okay?"

She shook off his hand.

Once they stopped, she turned to him. "You rouse the owner. I'll get the shovel."

"Look. Let's leave this to the law. Call the police about the cats." Jake wanted to push her out of the car and drive back to Crawfordsville.

"The law?" Helen smiled, showing jagged teeth. "Ain't no law out here. Not anymore." She handed Jake a small flashlight.

"Then let's wait. It's completely dark inside."

Helen shook her head and pointed to the trailer. "Someone's home."

Jake knew this was all wrong. Knew he should run from this place. He peered into the fallow field before getting out. There wasn't a cat in sight. He clicked on the flashlight, climbed the moldering wooden steps and knocked. The door drifted open and a horrible stench came out.

"Anyone here?"

No one answered.

Jake held his nose and pulled open the door. The flashlight revealed the floor, littered with garbage. He stepped in and tried a light switch. Nothing. Using the flashlight beam he looked to his right, the kitchen was torn apart with shattered dishes, cupboard doors open and trash everywhere. To his left was a living room. A head with a straw hat rested on a chair with the back to him. Maybe she was just asleep?

"Hey, wake up." Jake strode into the living room and shined the light on the woman. A sunken body of torn skin and bone sat in the chair. The feet and hands had been tied together and one leg hung strangely as if it had been snapped in half.

He shined the light around the room. Stacked against the walls were piles of bones, some still glistening with bits of flesh. There had to be twenty or thirty full skeletons. Jake's stomach clenched and threatened to spew its contents.

He ran to the door. Bolted out. A whistling sound. A shovel. Jake felt his face warm with blood as everything went dark.

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Jake was lying on his stomach. Before he opened his eyes, he smelled the rot of death. His nose had to be broken and the skin over his right eye felt tight. He tried to touch his nose and found his hands tied behind his back. His leg and the cuts on his side stung worse than ever. And his throat felt like it might melt.

The place was silent, save a faint scratching coming from a nearby wall.

Slow footsteps approached. Jake felt his heartbeat in his broken nose and his eye. Jake lifted his head. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Time to cleanse the area."

Jake felt warm breath on the back of his ear.

"My children will inherit the earth. Already finished off most of the village."

"Can't hurt old Bill, though, can they?"

She hissed, sending a shiver down Jake's spine.

"You're not my great aunt." Jake tried to wriggle his hands free, but the more he moved, the tighter the rope became. He needed to waste time and hope Bill had seen them pass by earlier.

Helen cackled. "Your aunt is amid the bones."

The sound of ripping and tearing filled the air, like taut leather being split by a knife. Jake turned his head to see claws protruding where hands once were, the holes red and dripping with blood. She pushed his head into the floor and sharp claws penetrated his scalp.

"Can't eat you myself. The old hawk filled you with poison. My children can be sacrificed, though. We can't have another of Bill's kind roaming the countryside."

The bandages on Jake's legs were torn off and his wounds stung as soon as air hit.

“They’ll smell you. Only take them a few minutes to get in.” Light footsteps left the room. “You got your wish. Escaping normal life.” The door opened and closed and a car sparked to life, left the driveway.

Scratching returned and was accompanied with the same growls Jake had heard on the road.

*Now what? Think.* Jake rolled onto his back and peered around the dark room. *The kitchen.* With his feet tied, he’d have to roll there. It hurt at first, but fear of the cats overpowered pain. As he rolled over bone and cold wet bits, he wanted to hurl again. Once beyond the door, the scratches and growls rose. There had to be a hundred of them laying siege.

In the kitchen, he felt his way around and focused his sight as best he could. He found a white plate shard that might work. Jake gripped it between his hands and brought his feet to his back. He sawed at the rope for minutes. The door creaked under growing pressure. Finally, he freed his feet. Jake stood. He shuffled through kitchen drawers as the hissing rose. Finally, he pulled a knife from a drawer and attempted to free his hands that soon became wet with blood. But just as he ripped through flesh, the rope split and his hands were free.

Jake wiped his wrists on his shorts, but it was no use, the deep cuts continued to seep. He took another knife from the drawer. He couldn’t kill them all, but maybe scare them away after a few were slain.

A window shattered in the living room followed by a series of thuds on the floor. Without light to aid him, Jake backed into a corner and waited. A prowling wave flowed toward him and the onslaught began. He sliced through the air, hitting cats as they leapt. Teeth and claws sunk into him and the weight threatened to pull him over.

Jake kept slicing even though it was useless. Their weight pulled him to his knees and he felt his scalp being ripped off. This was it. The end. He’d never see Molly again. Never see his family or Crawfordsville again. His body began to numb completely. Death wouldn’t be so bad. The worst was over.

A horn blasted and it sounded like the door was blown from its hinges. Cats screamed and scurried away. The room lightened for a moment and a wicked face, twisted with anger, appeared in front of him. He recognized the blue-grey eyes. Bill Hawken.

“Now you’re indebted to me.” Bill wore a devilish smile and his eyes lit like the embers of a coal-fire. “Your *human* life has come to an end.”

Jake's sight blurred and the embers began to fade. Molly popped into his mind. Her gentle eyes led him into darkness.

## **Night Is Coming...**

*Patricia Anabel*

The night is coming  
You should hide  
You hear humming  
By your side

Creatures crawling  
From the ground  
Hear their howling  
Awful sound

They are famished  
For your flesh  
Humans vanished  
You're so fresh

Your pulse I hear  
Like chiming bell  
Your blood, your fear  
A taunting smell

You must go now  
Must not stay  
I am the hunter  
You're the prey

My thirst for blood  
I cannot hush  
You present a feast  
Oh so lush

So flee at once  
I must not slip  
It's been ages  
Since my last sip!



## **Becoming The Night**

***Ron Koppelberger***

Modesty faced the depth, the level of dreaming consistency unto the realms of shadow and clever excuse; he wore an excuse for an evening-tide penance, the wish of eternal darkness, born in dark tomorrows and sightless dawns. He was becoming the night in slow stages of evolution, the light a bit less than gray and he was in thrall at the prospect of raven's eyes and ancient owls roosting in night shadow, waiting for the hunt, the silhouette of arcane direction and wizened intrigue,

An awareness stole his attentions and in that moment of heightened divinity he saw the sky, velvet, soft, coy in caresses of bequeathed affection. He was becoming the night, by the wont of sleeping wolves and shape shifting convenience, he was becoming the dream, the careful pull at blameless beauty and twilight borders, the beseeching brandy sipped in intoxicating wills of ecstasy, by bliss and nocturnal guard he was and he wanted the promise, the oneness of midnight and summer echoes of acquiescent essence, ethereal and vast. He was becoming the night.

## Midnight Black and Restless

*Lee Clark Zumpe*

Live oak spread impatient limbs beneath the blighted heavens, their anxious branches scratching at the uncanny twilight. Underneath the sprawling boughs, festooned with Spanish moss dangling in the breeze, rows of antiquated mansions crouch on weedy lots, windows blackened – or, in a few instances, dimly lit as if by flickering candles. Cloudy pools of stagnant rainwater frame the uneven brick lane winding through the moldering neighborhood.

A young man traces the cracked stones of a neglected sidewalk. His mother called him Napoleon, but he never knew her name.

Underground, choked sewers dating back a hundred years swarm with inappropriate shadows. The air is thick with decay, fouled by the stench of discarded ambition and forfeited lives. Something more lingers in these cavernous culverts, something more loathsome than the cesspools concealing it – something unnamable and intangible and utterly malevolent.

Napoleon steers clear of the sewer holes, the uncovered drainage pipes yawning black into the night. Rats sometimes congregate in the gutters in unnatural numbers, as if they gather to answer some inexplicable mandate.

The dwellers of this crumbling quarter shrink away into their collective desolation, perceiving the faceless degeneracy stewing beneath their feet. Impoverished, malnourished and neglected by society, they teeter on a precipice staring into the grim face of ruin. Like impatient vultures haunting a dying animal, the unholy trinity of shame, remorse and hunger taunt them. They cling desperately to their threadbare lives, becoming terminally inconsolable and dreadfully reckless.

Despondency leads to dangerous passivity. Destitute and dispossessed minds bend all too swiftly to dark designs.

Mere blocks away, throngs of people gather in another street – no younger, but far better maintained. A model of urban renewal, the main street surges with dynamic rejuvenation. Refashioned to draw vast crowds of wealthy young college students, the boulevard pulses with reanimated life in the form of nightclubs, taverns, and bistros. Running the gamut from trendy to seamy, the selection appeals to a broad spectrum of patrons eager



to indulge in any and every vice imaginable while local law enforcement agents disregard all but the most debauched transgressions.

In this milieu where immorality is chic and decadence flourishes, religion might seem an unwelcome nuisance. Yet handfuls of zealots prowl these streets, overtly preaching their malformed doctrines, sermonizing corrupt scriptures, testifying before small clusters of angst-ridden disciples. Standing on street corners wearing jeans and sandals, they speak confidently and convincingly about the inevitable deterioration of civilization and the coming of a dark messiah.

Though some would denounce their faith as infantile and unsophisticated, it has roots stretching back farther in time than any other extant religion. Some claim the creed predates even the earliest settlements on the Nile, though no scholarly evidence has been forwarded.

Louis believes. He addresses any who would listen. Often he finds himself derided, his words misconstrued and scorned. Most skeptics leave chuckling, unwilling or unable to accept the difficult truth. A few linger, ingesting as much as they can stomach.

Like the sacrificial leaves of late autumn, most words uttered by the cryptic priest drift unobserved to the ground – even by the most dedicated devotees. Shrouded in archaic terminology, muddled by clumsy and incompetent translations, the sacred passages grow more incoherent and inaccessible with each passing century. In an age of rampant war and famine and pestilence, tabloid prophecies come cheap and effortlessly souring the insight and wisdom of the ancients – undermining faith and diluting piety amidst the masses.

Yet, those few who take the time to gather the scattered words of the long-dead prophets realize that fragments of their insight litter the dogma of all the world's established religions. Ageless traditions and classical mythologies sprouted from the same seeds bore out of cultures lost to time, from societies which peaked and receded ten thousand years ago. These prehistoric doctrines spark the zeal of a few modern missionaries who risk ostracism and ridicule to give voice to nightmarish visions.

“When I was young, I believed Christianity held all the answers,” Louis scans the eyes of those gathered around him, gauging their curiosity and concern. Always quick to distinguish attentiveness from indifference, he recognizes familiar faces and new additions to his flock. “As I matured, I had to acknowledge all the discrepancies and contradictions. In my pursuit

of the truth, I immersed myself in religious studies in college. It was during that time I learned why there are so many parallels between eastern and western conventions – so many corresponding points amongst the world’s many faiths.”

As Louis preaches to his few parishioners, the dusk shuffles them all into obscurity amidst the turmoil of excessive indulgence, gluttony, and avarice. The night staggers drunkenly, unsympathetic to her various admirers as they abuse themselves in her honor.

Midnight black and restless, shadows stir deep in the squalid sewers beneath the dilapidated manors peopled by demoralized and exploited outcasts. Two worlds, separated by a few city blocks, rarely intersect. Not even the most inebriated of revelers would dare shamble down one of the poorly lit avenues into the rundown neighborhoods nearby. Those needy souls who dwell in this depressing district shun the bright lights and the noisy taverns and the crowded sidewalks fearing maltreatment and incarceration at the hands of malicious security guards and corrupt cops.

When the two worlds do overlap, violence follows.

Napoleon hides in the hedgerow outside his aunt’s house. A dropout facing a lifetime of hardships, he knows why his family refers to him as “the slow one,” why he spent his childhood passed back and forth between feuding relatives. Being an object of both pity and anxiety demoralized Napoleon into a brooding casualty with few encouraging prospects and fewer idyllic memories to soothe him.

Angry voices drift from an upstairs window, and Napoleon cringes. He hears his aunt shrieking about bills, about insurance, about her empty refrigerator. Her boyfriend’s car dozes in the driveway, the windows moist with evening dew. Even though they may be fighting now, he will wind up staying until dawn. When his aunt keeps overnight company, Napoleon has to find another place to sleep.

Not yet tired enough to curl up on leaves beneath a tangle of shrubs, Napoleon returns to his aimless wanderings. Retracing his steps along the curb, he gazes up through the tangled limbs at the sparkling stars scattered overhead through the vast chasm of space. The night sky fascinates him and he wanders into the middle of the street to get a better view. He spins on his heels, slowly circling again and again, searching the visible twilight for the vigilant moon.

Tonight, the moon is curiously absent. In the darkness, far-flung swirling galaxies seem somehow closer than his closest relation on earth.

Dizzy from his spontaneous dance, Napoleon wobbles to the edge of the lane, skirting the gutter and straying closer than he should to the sewer hole. Something in that black pit catches his eye – something luminous and glistening, something radiant yet largely shrouded by darkness. He hesitates, wary of the whispered horrors occupying the underground tunnels – almost too frightened to probe the shadows to perceive the outlines of this invisible shimmer.

Still, it beckons him and he cannot resist. He creeps closer while the sprawling boughs of live oaks shiver, while the blighted heavens tremble, and while the dwellers of this crumbling quarter withdraw deeper into their seclusion sensing some awful incident coming to pass within the folds of dusk.

Meanwhile, Louis releases his apostles who scatter into the crowds. He walks the street, head bowed solemnly, disregarding the occasional invectives and obscenities directed toward him from the ignorant and the iniquitous. Ultimately, he fights an arduous battle – but one that might yet be won, given his capacity for persuasion. Each soul he reaches, each life he touches, each heart he converts becomes a warrior to stand against the dark messiah. He stands out amidst fellow believers – no other can sway minds like he, no other can induce loyalty like he. No other has proven so adroit at transforming the tenets of their ideology into accessible and plausible sermons.

He envisions an impending war that will decimate the earth. He imagines a dark messiah with a hidden agenda leading legions of agitators and idolaters and heretics in a crusade against morality and virtue. He predicts an age of unrelenting violence and wanton savagery, an epoch of atrocities. Louis foresees looming darkness, generations of bloodshed, and a traitorous enemy who would murder his own armies whether they win or lose the struggle.

He believes those imperfect souls surrounding him on this street of endless depravity and sin will be the first to blindly serve the dark messiah. Those who scoff at his words and malign his disciples will acquiesce instinctively, never once realizing their own lives will be wasted serving one who seeks to destroy them. That is why he preaches here; that is why he tries to right these listing spirits who find him so insufferable.

Louis takes a shortcut down an unfamiliar lane this night, rattled by more than the normal share of insults and sneers. A few blocks away, a young man he has never met serves as an audience to a different kind of cleric.

The restful voice in the sewer promises Napoleon an end to his misery, his poverty, and his anxiety. Depicting an existence beyond the black and silent gulfs of the outermost cosmos, an existence free from want and despair, it seduces him into effortless surrender. The boy shrugs as he tries to think of a reason not to accept the offer.

Napoleon's shadow collapses and evaporates. In instants, all his memories wash from his lungs in one last breath – his awareness shrivels gradually, vision blurring. He feels neither pain or pleasure, neither grief or happiness. The stars buzz around him like flies surveying a corpse. He senses the icy touch of ebon fingers grazing his forehead, hears a faint whisper speak undecipherable words across his own trembling lips.

Darkness consumes him as he drifts upward toward the vast chasm of space and the weary stars.

Louis spots a gaunt, rickety frame struggling to right itself. His initial uneasiness begs him to avoid the situation, to turn back and face the derision of the heretics, to discount the shambling figure as nothing more than a drunken local stumbling home from a night on the town. He slows his pace, but continues on, swallowing his apprehension. He thrusts out a hand to steady the young man, wordlessly committing to an act of charity.

"You are the preacher," the young man says, his voice more assertive and serious than his precariousness would impress. His cold grip coils about the arm of this benevolent man. "I have been hoping to meet you for some time."

"I am one of many priests," Louis answers, nodding. He scans the face of the boy, seeking attentiveness or indifference, preparing for either acclaim or contempt. In these eyes, he finds neither. In these eyes, he sees churning black maelstroms. In these eyes, he sees the awful void of the bitter heavens reflected in the hopelessness of the poor.

In these eyes, he sees the dark design that will lure the detested and the disliked, the desperate and shunned.

Louis shudders at the revelation. He squandered years preaching among the wicked and the licentious, believing they would be the first to

submit to the whims of the dark messiah. “The meek,” he mutters, recalling his Sunday school lessons, “shall inherit the earth.”

The scaffold of the young man fits tightly against the tenebrous incarnation of the dark messiah. Balance almost escapes him, and he totters side to side on uneasy legs, still clutching the man he intends to assassinate. Even in his disorientation, slaughter comes most naturally. The first of many hosts serves his needs on this night as he forever silences the most effective agent the opposition has yet presented.

Louis staggers and falls, collapsing in the muddy gutter. He dies an unacknowledged martyr for a noncommittal faith.

Premature casualties in an imminent war, two lifeless bodies rest beneath the live oak canopy upon a winding lane in a rundown neighborhood. While a handful may whisper tales about dark influences and ancient cults, officially investigators will report that on the fringe between two conflicting worlds, such incidents are commonplace.

## **Rogue Annabelle**

*Melissa Kline*

Rogue Annabelle, you will be mine...

“Be careful, Mara. Who knows what lurks in that darkness?”

Mara rolled her eyes at her crewman’s stupid remark, grateful that her space helmet concealed her annoyance. She suddenly regretted the intimate bond she’d developed with her top scientist.

“We’ve been studying this planet for years, Smith. It’s dead. And it’s Captain Moreu.”

“Right, well, I’ve got the geo scanners and infrared devices...”

Mara blocked out Smith’s technical jargon and took in the vast dark terrain before her. She’d waited long enough for this moment. Massive jagged rock jutted from the ground, barely visible against the black backdrop of space. Tiny insignificant pinpoints of light from stars trillions of light years away were the only source of natural illumination. Deep ebony cracks - unbelievably huge caverns – scarred the planet’s surface. Chaos and turmoil had plagued Annabelle’s skin. She had fought a long, hard battle. Like most rogues, Annabelle was suspended in a cloud of dark matter... sitting... waiting. This dark planet held secrets. Mara was determined to unearth them.

“Hmmm, that’s very strange.” Smith’s voice pierced Mara’s ears.

“What’s strange?”

“The data we’ve been analyzing doesn’t match what I’m gathering now.”

Mara turned to look at her crewman who appeared more like a walking circus than scientist. Aside from the plethora of technical equipment and gadgets surrounding him like a halo, his white space suit was covered in a blanket of black dust that had been kicked up from their landing.

Mara held back a laugh, focusing on the task at hand.

“What do you mean, it doesn’t match?” she asked.

“She’s not dead, Mara. The surface is actively moving, quickly, at this very moment.”

“Moving?” Mara looked down at her boots, illuminating nothing but black powdery dust. “Nothing’s moving, Smith. We’ve analyzed the data

hundreds of times. There's no activity whatsoever on this planet. She's been dormant for billions of years."

"Well, according to my readings..."

"Screw the readings, Smith. Take a look around. Nothing is moving."

"You two alright out there?"

Smith was quick to respond. "Ambrose, I need to compare some data. Send me your latest readings..."

"Do you see any activity?" Mara cut in. "Is anything moving?"

"That's a negative, captain. No movement. Planet is dead as a doornail, as they say. Is your equipment defective, Smith?"

"*Something's* defective..." Mara mumbled.

"I heard that, Moreu."

"Enough! Let's do some damned research." Mara trudged through the black sand toward the Nuevus Canyon keeping an eye out for any movement. She was not easily spooked, but something about this planet was unusual – she couldn't deny that.

"I think there's activity under the sand, Moreu," Smith said. "What if the sand itself is alive? I'm hesitant to bring the sample back."

"We'll put it in holding." Mara began to question Smith's mental state.

"Stay close, you're getting too far out."

Too far? She'd barely taken a few steps. It was impossible to keep Smith off her heels.

"You'll be fine, Smith."

"Mar... I... ccc... hear..."

Nearing the edge of the canyon, Mara stopped to babysit her crewman. She turned to see nothing but darkness – no Smith, no lights, nothing. Mara squinted – had she really ventured that far? Or was it merely an illusion in the black abysmal atmosphere.

"Smith? Can you hear me? Smith?"

"...crrr... crrr..."

"Dammit!"

"Ambrose? Come in. Come in, Ambrose."

Silence.

Mara's tracking data told her that her scout ship and crewman weren't too far off, so why couldn't she at least see their bright lights in the distance?

“Damn!” She had no choice but to back track. Anxiety ripped through her like a storm. Would she find a way out, or be forever lost with Annabelle?

Mara marched through the darkness, waiting for some sign of life. When the first spark of light came into view, relief washed over her. She ran toward the hazy beam, trying desperately to pick up a signal.

“Smith! Come in. Ambrose?”

No response.

The lone beam became her driving force, her lifeline – the only way out. She had to get answers, had to know how she had wandered from her ship and crewman so quickly, and most importantly – she had to get off of the mysterious black planet and get back to the mother ship.

As Mara approached the beam of light, she noticed it was stationary, completely unmoving. Perhaps it wasn’t a person? But if that were the case, than why only a single light?

“I’ve got you, you bitch!” Smith’s vindictive words deafened her, followed by a sharp puncturing pain in her shoulder blade. A heavy blow knocked the air from her body. Mara reached for the knife strapped to her suit, but another hit had her on the ground.

“Smith! STOP!” She looked up to find a raging, wild-eyed Smith, still fully equipped in his space suit, holding a long metal bar she recognized from the scout ship. He relentlessly hit her with it, smashing her over and over again as she screamed and begged for mercy. She clambered and clawed at the ground, attempting to get away, but the pain in her shoulder and the advantage Smith had with his long metal bar made escape impossible.

“I love you, Smith!” The only tactic she had left.

“You don’t love me! You don’t love anything! You’re a selfish bitch!” He threw the bar aside and grabbed her by the helmet.

Panic seized every cell in her body. She thrashed and screamed. “NOOO!!!”

“Goodbye, *Captain Moreu*.”

Darkness enveloped her, wrapped her in a black void. She was suspended in a cloud of dark matter... sitting... waiting...

Mara, you are mine...



## **A Wonderful Night**

*Matthew Wilson*

James watched the dark and the dark watched right back.

Night had fallen like a black curtain across a stage. The play was over. Mom was dead. She'd been infected with T.B long before he was born, had inadvertently passed it on to him before his fifth year. That was long time ago now, he was sixteen and on the start of life. Soon he'd find himself a girl, a car, a job and he'd happy as Mom said.

But now Mom would say nothing. The doctor buried her only that morning.

He'd been worried as James coughed in his presence. No, he'd been spitting tar only recently. He could not go to hospital; he was busy with Mom's affairs, writing to her sister in Australia. The only person who bothered to acknowledge she existed though she lived on the other side of the world.

Didn't avoid her like the plague as if fearing infection.

It wasn't Mom's fault. Though they'd hurt her through the bricks through the window and official complaints for her to be transferred to humiliating confinement, she could not hurt them now.

But James could.

The doctor told him a visit to his office was very important, it was only down the road. He was the family physician, James had lost his first baby tooth and had his first lollypop in there. It would only take a minute; he'd bought him into this world sixteen years ago and aimed to keep him in it if he could.

Too late.

The T.B had turned his lungs to liquid. The doctor gave him two months to live.

All those wonderful dreams, gone. Liquid like his lungs.

James lit a cigarette in defiance to his red raw air ways and watched the tiny little hamlet houses. People had come here for its isolation, its peaceful nature. At night the only sound beside the birds in the trees had been Mom's coughing. The only way they knew she still lived. Still infecting them by hacking in the same air they breathed.

His pockets were filled with paper, demands he leave and take her infection with him. They'd put up with an old widow but did not extend the same patience to her child. They wanted a clean slate, free air they did not fear to suck into their bodies.

James coughed and wiped the blood with the cuff of his dirty sleeve.

Finishing the cigarette, he headed toward the telegraph pole, the warning yellow sign said High Danger Of Death.

"Now what we got here?" he wondered aloud, shrugged and brought the axe down on the metal box. Nothing happened, somewhere through an open window he heard a football game reaching the final minutes. He spat on his palms for friction like a goal keeper's gloves and raised the axe again.

Bang!

After the initial flash of sparks the lights powered down in the houses, then went out completely.

Darkness reigned and James felt something wonderful turn in his chest now it matched the colour of his heart. Thirty two steps to the first house, seven to the next. He'd been over all this in the last few days, walking like a pirate with no treasure map, planning out his paces for the gold beneath the sand.

People had laughed, people would always laugh. But he could easily find his way through the forty two houses with eyes shut. He smiled and lit another cigarette. The sack of axes and knives was heavy but in time, by each house he visited it would lighten more and more.

Mom would never let him buy a gun, they were such dangerous things and she had such a sweet soul. He coughed now and let it come. Let them complain. Who the hell were they?

He sucked at the air, failing to cool the heat of his blood. How wonderful his journey across the globe would have been. A girlfriend in Italy, maybe, learning how to drive on the other side of the road in France. Now he'd nothing but one wonderful night. His last. When dawn burned along the hamlet all they'd find was forty houses devoid of life and him along with it.

Such a wonderful night ahead. He picked up his bag of knives and started walking toward the first home. He did not knock on the door as etiquette demanded. The window was open in the warm evening air. It would do just fine.

# **The Closet**

*Timothy Frasier*

Mother come tell me a tale  
And tuck me in tight  
Don't leave me alone I wail  
This dark autumn night

Something inside my closet moves  
I know you think I'm mad  
Open the door you'll see it proves  
I'm no mischievous lad

Mother please don't close the door  
For in blackness I will scream  
I'll be good forevermore  
I pray this is just a dream

Darkness overtakes my room  
Her footsteps fade away  
Whispers spell impending doom  
While motionless I lay

Things begin to rattle  
In my closet oh so near  
Like haunts locked in battle  
Or something much worse I fear

Quick as it started  
The sounds suddenly end  
I feel faint hearted  
A ship that's lost its wind

A sigh of relief leaves my lips  
My heartbeat begins to slow  
The taste of sleep I still may sip  
Pleasant dreams will start to flow

The closet door creaks open  
I snatch the blanket over my head  
Something shuffles towards me and then  
It crawls slowly underneath my bed...

## Garden of Forms

*Robina Williams*

“It’s not far now,” said Jake.

“I’m dead beat,” Meg moaned. “Do we have to visit this garden?”

“We do.”

“I’ve seen lots of gardens.”

“Not one like this,” Jake assured her.

“What’s so special about it?”

“You’ll find out.” Jake took her arm. “Come on, we’re nearly there.”

And indeed they were. A few minutes later they rounded the bend in the road and Meg saw, to her right, a pair of imposing stone pillars from which hung ornate wrought iron gates that stood open. ‘GARDEN OF FORMS’ proclaimed a sign planted in the grass verge.

“What’s a garden of forms?” Meg asked.

“You’ll see!” With a smile Jake ushered her through the gates.

A long driveway led to a Georgian house flanked symmetrically by matching stable blocks; a red-and-white painted wooden barrier had been pulled across the path, blocking it, and another sign warned that the property was PRIVATE. Dogs barked in the distance.

“Are you sure we’re allowed in here?” Meg asked.

“The gardens are open to the public,” said Jake. “Some of the time,” he added. “This way.” He guided her along a track that meandered across a lawn and disappeared into a stand of trees. “The Garden of Forms is through here.”

“I’m guessing,” Meg said, “that it’s some sort of topiary display. I’ve always liked topiary.”

Jake laughed.

As Meg emerged from the copse into the meadow beyond she saw that the Forms were not trimmed topiary figures but huge bronze sculptures. She gasped at the sight. “My god!”

“Impressive, aren’t they?” Jake said.

Meg shuddered.

“Don’t you like them?” Jake sounded surprised.

“They’re spooky.”

“What’s spooky about them?”

"It's like a bronze menagerie."

"That's exactly what it is."

"They're so lifelike," Meg whispered.

"The mark of a good sculptor," Jake remarked.

"They're *too* lifelike. The lion's swinging his tail and poised like he's about to pounce and, ugh, that cobra!" Meg stepped back with a grimace. "Look at his hood-he's ready to attack."

"He's a statue," Jake laughed. "Come and stroke him." He walked up to the cobra and ran his hand along the snake's back. He strolled over to a snarling tiger and gazed at it admiringly.

Meg shivered. "I don't like it here. These things are weird."

"They're works of art. I thought you'd like them." Jake seemed very disappointed.

"Well, I don't," Meg said firmly. "Can we go now?"

"In a minute. I just want to check out that sculpture over there." Jake pointed to the far side of the field. "It's new. Leastways, I don't remember it being here last time I visited. Sit on that bench there and have a little rest. Then we'll go into town, find a café and have tea." He glanced at his watch. "It's getting late anyway."

"Okay." Meg wandered over to the high-backed wooden seat a short distance away and sank onto it. She watched Jake thread his way between the sculptures, heading for the latest one: a bear standing on its hind legs. "What a strange place," she thought, as she leaned against the backrest and closed her eyes.

When she woke up, she found herself in darkness. She stared about her, uncomprehending at first, then remembered that she and Jake had been visiting the Garden of Forms. Jake? Jake? Where was he? Had he fallen asleep on a bench in the garden as well? She jumped up and called his name but heard no response. Surely he hadn't left her there on his own? Something had happened to him-why else didn't he answer her? Again and again she shouted his name.

Desperate now to leave the garden and seek help, she turned, looking for the path, but could not find it. Seeing the black outline of the clump of trees that she knew stood between the meadow and the gate, she decided to head for it; beyond the trees lay the house-and its occupants. She'd risk knocking on the door, knowing she was trespassing and hoping they wouldn't set the dogs on her. In one final attempt to make contact with her

partner before leaving the garden, she turned back again and shouted Jake's name again. It was then, she realized, with a heart-stopping sense of horror, that Jake was not all that was missing. Where were the sculptures? Their silhouettes should be visible. Meg peered into the gloom; disoriented and feeling sick with fear. She closed her eyes and took some deep breaths to try to calm herself in this nightmare world into which she had awoken.

When she looked around once more she saw, with a shock, that she was no longer alone: slowly, through the darkness, lights approached. She sighed with relief: torches meant rescue. She called out as they drew nearer. But no human voice responded and, as she stared at the lights, she wondered why they were so small and unwavering. She heard sounds and understood with a fresh surge of terror, that she was seeing the gleaming eyes of predatory animals. She glimpsed the outlines of the creatures as they moved closer and recognized them as the bronze figures. The Forms had come alive. The lion she had seen earlier as a sculpture lifted his head and roared, the bear, on all fours now, growled, a hyena laughed, a monkey screeched, a snake hissed; the night air was suddenly full of noise--the voices of angry, hungry animals. As the creatures struck, she had a vision of them trapped inside their bronze prisons; her dying thought was the remembrance that Jake had brought her to this place of horror.

## Down In The Basement

*Matthew Wilson*

“Sorry, officer, I’d rather stay on the stairs. I don’t like the dark.”

“Is it all right if I go down in the basement? The neighbours have complained about the smell.”

“Not at all. It’s the drains, you know, they’ve been acting up. Clogged with all the January rain. I’ve had to do some decorating down here to cover the mould because of it. Please don’t touch the walls. I doubt it’s set.”

“Yes, there’s some nice work down here. Did you lay the new floor yourself?”

“With my bad knee? No, Rachael did it. There’s ten steps down, watch your head on the beams. That’s it. One, two-”

“Yes. She has talent, are you sure you’ve no idea where she might have gone? A contact number?”

“None that comes to mind. Rachael found it hard to make friends, which is why we got along so well at home. We were more like sisters than mother and daughter.”

“Uh, huh. I see. Can you hit the lights? It’s awful dark down here.”

“Sorry, as I said, the wet fused the lights. Nothing works down there.”

“You’re shaking. Are you cold?”

“No, I just never like the dark, ever since I was a little girl. I always thought there were monsters in it waiting to pounce. Silly, I know, but Rachael was so much braver than I. She came down when we wanted a bottle of wine to celebrate. Have you seen the shelves there? My dead husband had quite a liquor collection.”

“Neat. Do you mind?”

“Oh, please don’t smoke with the plaster fumes. It might set the whole house off. Please don’t mark the floor either. Rachael’ll be awful sore when she comes back.”

“May I open a window? This stuff’s burning my eyes.”

“Of course. Would you like some tea?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to put you out, ma’am. I have to get back.”

“Oh it’s no trouble at all-”

“Damn!”

“Whatever’s the matter?”

“Sorry, my foot slipped. I've marked the cement. It's fresher than I thought. I'll never get this out - hey, there's something buried down here. It's a foot!”

“You mean, you want to go as well? Rachael wanted to leave too. Leave an old lady like me to look after herself! I'm not well you know, not with my dicky knee. Stay here; I'll go get your tea.”

“Hey! Where you going, get back here!”

“Don't worry, dear. I won't be long.”

“Ms Rolland, open this door. I'm an officer, open this door!”

“Oh I can't do that, dear. It's very dark down there. I don't like the dark, you know.”



## **The Dark Delirium**

*Ron Koppelberger*

The ancient stain of darkness undulated and rolled across the vast reaches of space, looking for a world to take, a haven for its cold purpose. Driven by the forces of shadow and utterly despairing passions, it found the earth and the town of Curious Wine. The distance between where it had come from and where it now lay was incalculable, it had traveled the farthest reaches of the universe looking for the perfect host to consolidate its wont. Curious Wine was the perfect starting point.

Pray Stitch saw the blood of ash and sunshine in the arrival of his girlfriend and the book. She stood poised near the front entrance of the apartment, pressing the entry buzzer and shifting the aged book between her hands. Pray buzzed her in as he opened the front door. The sound of children playing and loud music filled the apartment complex hall. Pray walked away from the door and to the small all-weather radio he had perched on the living room coffee table. Turning it up a bit he heard a loud static voice, "...the rain will be here at around 10 P.M. this evening... possible hail and severe weather is forecast for the town of Curious Wine!" He clicked the radio off and went back to the door where his girlfriend stood.

"Hey Baby," Cattail Morning said as she greeted him.

"Hello, sweetheart. I see you got the book," he said as he took it from her.

"Yeah and it wasn't easy, I had to hide it under my shirt. Tom Claner was staring at me the whole time." Tom was the Wine's librarian.

"Well, you got it and that's all that counts," Pray said excitedly. Cattail brushed her hair to one side and blew Pray a kiss.

"Just for you, honey." The book was ancient and stained with the elements of a time past. "Are you gonna try the spell tonight, Pray?" she asked, nodding at the book in his hands.

"Yes... it's the perfect time, the dark spot was visible to the naked eye last night, Cattail!" he said referring to the large anomaly that had appeared in last night's sky. Cattail went to Pray and took the book from him.

"First things first, Pray," she said as she kissed him on the lips.

He chuckled and said, "Is that the only thing on your mind, Cattail?"

“That’s not the only thing on my mind, Pray, but it’s better than that damn old book!”

As the hour of 10 P.M. approached the darkness gathered its strength in the delirium of what might be called inspiration. It seeped across the landscape in unearthly tendrils of darkness, cold, unwanted and forbidden to the world. It slid across Curious Wine, touching everything in its path with a mind numbing delirium, a kind of group knowledge that sees and hears what it wants. It spread its dark tentacles into the sleeping and waking minds of Curious Wine’s denizens, bringing forth an understanding of whispers and mirage and unbidden secret dreams. The delirium spread to everything and people started acting strange in response.

At 9:38 P.M. Mazy Hoper was sitting down to a bowl of chicken noodle soup, he always had the soup before bed, it helped him sleep and lately he had been having bad dreams. Dark spider webs of thought filled his mind as he took a sip of the chicken soup. What was this? he thought as he slammed the bowl into the wall. “What the hell is this?” he screamed as he flapped his arms wildly and started stabbing himself in the eye with the spoon. Blood poured from the empty socket of his left eye as he continued to dig at the opening. “WHAT THE HELL IS THIIIISSSSSS?” he screamed again as the blackness poured into his body, overwhelming him with delirium.

At 9:43 P.M. Art Tisklen was feeding the horses in his stable, they hadn’t eaten all day. He’d had things to do. He noticed that the horses were a bit nervous and something else, everything was off kilter. He had realized something was wrong in Curious Wine earlier today. Rob Slickstrum, the feed store owner, said it was the coming storm, the bad weather they would have later in the evening. “Sometimes animals pick up on that kinda thing!” he had said. He knew that Art’s chickens had climbed the willows in the front yard and the roosters were crowing from the tops of the trees.

“Yeah I guess so,” Art had replied with a bit of doubt. “Mebbee it’s the coming storm!” Art stood outside the stable staring at the willows and the approaching darkness that was worming its way into the farm. The roosters were throwing themselves out of the willows and hitting the ground with angry thuds. The seed of an idea black and thickly viscous filled Art’s mind for a moment as he went to one of the willows and began climbing it. He reached the top moments later and the tendrils of ice said “Jump, Art, jump!” in soft soothing whispers.

By 10:00 P.M. the darkness, cosmic and ethereal, filled the town of Curious Wine with its will, its power and its found purchase, knowing that the entire world would belong to the ancients, the shadow in wait. If it could've smiled it would have but its demeanor was cold and alien, not allowing for human sentiment. It stole the consciousness of the denizens with the oppressive stain of dark delirium and all over town things happened, insane things. The cold logic grew and flourished as the incidents occurred and time nearly stood still for Curious Wine.

At 10:05 P.M. it was hailing golf ball sized hail and dark sleet like rain in Wine. Pray Stitch and Cattail Morning were in the confines of Pray's Mustang GTO. The hail was threatening to break the windows of the car as it smashed into the glass in great cascades. Pray started the car and Cattail screamed as the book they had brought with them began to glow with a bright candent aura. "What is it?" she yelled over the torrent of sound.

"I'm not sure... but it's black and it wants everything, everything, Cattail, you and me and everyone!" he shouted back at her.

"Let's get out of here, Pray!" she pleaded with him as he eased the car forward to the two lane blacktop highway leading out of town.

The book fell open to a picture of a dark cloud with thousands of tentacles reaching away from it. The caption read "The Darkness of Delirium!"

"Do you think this is it?" she said, pointing to the picture in the book.

"I'm not sure, does it tell how to stop it?" he asked.

"No... it just says the avatar of the universe will take its resting place."

Pray said, "The town's gone, Cattail, we can never come back!" They were at the outskirts of Curious Wine where the hail had stopped. He said, "Look at that, Cattail!" They were looking at the sign near the side of the road that read Curious Wine, they were just beyond it. At the edge of the sign an inky blackness with what looked like tentacles waved around the sign and the hail continued on that side.

Pray and Cattail would always remember the sign and the darkness that threatened to swallow them whole, for now Curious Wine was the Dark Delirium's and the book's magic yet unknown to the couple.

## Someone Must Take Their Place

*Kevin L. Jones*

“I have to ask. What’s the catch? This apartment is lovely. Why is the rent so ridiculously low?”

The manager smiled at the young woman, “There’s nothing wrong with the apartment itself. It’s the unfortunate view.”

She frowned at the older man, “What do you mean?”

He gestured over to a large bay window, “Why don’t you take a look for yourself?”

She walked over, gazed out and grimaced as she saw row after row of headstones.

The manager stood next to her, “You see what I mean? This whole unit faces the graveyard and every time you look out your window that’s all you can see. It gives most folks the creeps.”

The young woman averted her gaze from the cemetery. “Well, I suppose it’s not the most pleasant view in the world but it could be worse. I’ll take it.”

The manager smile gratefully. “Well now this is good news indeed! I’ve been having a devil of a time renting this place out.”

Soon, with the help of her father and brother, she had moved in and settled. During the daylight hours the apartment was fine. The cemetery outside her window didn’t bother her in the least. It seemed a place of quiet serenity but, after nightfall, it took on a dark and sinister aspect. In her mind every gravestone there was a place of concealment for a ghost or demon. So when the sun sank below the horizon she would draw the curtains tight and not open them again until the break of dawn.

On her third night in her apartment she awoke a few minutes after two a.m. She was alarmed when she saw that her bedroom curtain was thrown wide open. Frantically she strained her eyes as she looked around the moonlit room for any signs of an intruder but there was no one there. Everything was as it should be. She smiled at her own skittishness. She must have just forgotten to draw the curtains before she went to bed. She got up and was about to pull them shut when she saw something odd, a light in the cemetery. She looked out across the graveyard and could see a lantern sitting atop one of the headstones and a man with a spade frantically

digging away at a gravesite. For a moment she thought it might be the caretaker until she saw the ghoul smashing open the unearthed coffin with his shovel. She was about to retrieve her cell phone and report this desecration to the authorities when she saw something that made her doubt her very sanity. The grave defiler reached down into the coffin; a young woman's hand came out and took hold of the outstretched limb. He pulled with all his might and soon she stood next to the man who had freed her from her place of interment.

She began to tremble when she saw the couple walking hand in hand across the cemetery and coming towards her apartment building. She felt herself grow weak in the knees when the moonlight struck the woman from the grave. Her dress and pale white flesh were transparent. This was too much for her mind to absorb and she fainted dead away.

When she awoke it was morning. She picked herself up from the floor and went to the window could see no sign that any of the graves had been disturbed. She quickly pulled on her clothes and ran down to the graveyard. She stood where she had seen the lantern but there was no turned earth or smashed open coffin. She shook her head in disbelief. It had all seemed so real but apparently the events of the previous evening were nothing more than a vivid nightmare. She left the cemetery not knowing what to make of it all.

Later that night she awoke and looked over at the clock on her nightstand. It was a few minutes after two a.m. She did not want to but found herself compelled to look at the bedroom curtains. They were once again thrown open. She arose from her bed and hesitantly walked towards her window. There was a light in the cemetery. Against her better judgment she put on her coat and went out towards the lantern's glow. Soon she found herself standing before an open grave. A man stepped out from behind a stone angel. She was surprised to see that it was the manager of her apartment building. She was about to ask him what in the world was he doing in the graveyard in the middle of the night but she never got the chance. He swung the shovel that he had concealed behind his back. The vicious blow sent her flying down into the grave and the open coffin that waited for her there. Before she knew what was happening to her he had the lid shut and was furiously filling in the grave.

As she struggled within the black confines of her place of entombment she could hear his voice in between shovels full of earth striking the coffin

lid.

“I’m sorry I’ve had to do this terrible thing to you but it was the only way I could have my wife restored to me. You see, when you take someone from the grave someone must take their place.”

## Night Encounter

*Patricia Anabel*

It's that time between the day and night,  
When parents gather their young ones in panic and fright  
Dusk grows into the darkness and when the night is deep  
The Creature slowly rises from its restless sleep  
He is tall and handsome, ravenous and wild,  
Once he sets his eyes upon you, there's nowhere to hide.  
He glides through the landscape, a shadow against the night sky,  
He's the movement you thought you'd seen from a corner of your  
eye.

He searches for his victim, innocent and fair,  
A ravishing beauty with raven-like hair.  
Just above the village he eyes up his prey  
He swoops down upon her, standing in her way.  
There's no scream, no prayer, no cry, however small  
She's standing there in utter silence, beautiful and tall  
The creature stops moving, its body burning with desire  
Yet the girl's emerald eyes stir in him a different fire.  
She bravely steps forward, her neck and bosom bare  
And in her eyes he sees a glimpse of attitude and dare  
As he grabs her and takes her, for a few moments at least  
The only sound to break the silence is one of feeding beast  
That... and her silent moans and shortening of breath  
Before she slips to the ground into the arms of death  
He towers above her, so lifeless, so white  
Her emerald eyes are empty, gone is the light  
He looks at her for one last time, his face frowns in pain  
He knows he'll be like this forever, searching the end in vain  
There's a shriek from his throat and the hand forms the fist  
As he disappears once more into the morning mist...

## **Weeding The Weak**

*Matthew Wilson*

The car boot opened and when the tape across his eyes came off, tearing away a brow. Sean tried to scream but the oil smeared gag was still in his mouth.

The man, smelling of cheap cigarettes and petrol, spun him round and cut the ropes round his wrist with one neat snip of his hunter's knife. Was he letting him go?

“What?”

The foot came up and connected with his chest. Sean felt the air leave his body as his ankles locked and he fell backward, scaring roosting birds as he slid down the hill, wailing till his side whammed into the mossy side of the tree and rotten conkers rained like hail around his head.

Sean moaned, blinking his eyes till the blood inside them completely went away. It was too dark to see the man on top of the hill until he walked in front of the head lights and threw something after him.

Sean rolled into a ball, expecting anything. A grenade?

The pistol flew past his head, taking the twig off a tree and landed in a bush. Above him the headlights went off.

And the hunter started counting backward from two hundred.

Shit, shit. He didn't deserve this. Dad had told him it would be fun to go camping, that he'd save him from the big bad raccoons their fires might attract and hop in his sleeping bag for stale peanuts.

But now Dad couldn't help him. Dad was dead. Sean had woken to the screams, Dad had told him not to wipe with poison ivy and with how miserable he was suffering in the cold, Sean was glad there was justice in the world.

Till the man in the bright orange jacket crawled in, an axe in one hand.

Sean was so shocked, detached from reality he almost apologised for being in the way. Had Dad rented his tent out? Was he sleeping here now?

Beer fumes washed over Sean, made him gag as the hunter came further in, grabbed his foot and pulled him out into the dark, sleeping bag and all. Dad lay dead, his head some distance from his body on the cooling stones of the camp fire.



Sean tried to scream but the man turned the axe over, brought the handle of the weapon down onto Sean's head instead of the blade as he had his father and sleep fell over him as he was placed in the boot of his car.

“One hundred forty five, one hundred forty four, one hundred forty three-”

Weeping, Sean crawled forward like a baby learning to cross a room, pushing away shit smeared bushes, feeling for the pistol. Presumably, the local wild life used this place as a toilet. Was the weapon real? Or just a trick to give Sean faint hope which the hunter would delight in taking away?

His head ached like his cranium had been opened up, brains scooped out. He shook it defiantly as a black curtain passed over it and darkness beckoned. Adrenaline kept him on his feet, shaky, he vomited once and, keeping one hand pressed behind his ear to stop anything leaking out, he fumbled blindly on the ground with the other.

If only it was not so dark, a weight almost pushing his nose closer to the mulchy roots.

Bang!

An owl screamed once in the trees and fell down dead.

“Hey, I'm not ready! I'm not ready!” Sean wept. Felt something brush his fingers, break a nail. He retraced its path and found the trigger. “Thanks, God, thank you so much,” he whispered.

Then the hand came around his mouth and stopped his breathing.

The boy had no problem disarming him, lining his back up against a tree. Finally he seemed to give Sean some trust and release his nose at least to let him greedily snort air.

Up on the hill the hunter was still counting.

Sean detected no stale alcohol on the air. The fingers were scabbed but the palms were soft; this was no hunter's hands. This was a child, maybe a year or two older than him. Sean could hear him breathing in his ear, the rapid thud of his heart whacked like a sledge hammer into the soft flesh between his shoulder blades.

“How can you possibly still be alive with all your noise? I can hear you clear across the hill. Don't struggle. I'm on your side. This sicko got me last night; I've been running round in circles and gave him the slip. I guess his blood lust needed someone, anyone. Looks like you were it.”

He gave Sean's mouth a final pinch. “You cool?”

Sean nodded once, released. He staggered away, looking at the boy's hands. He had a gun in each.

"He killed my mom, he get someone you love?"

Sean rubbed his neck. "Yeah, my dad."

"Let me guess, he was a camping fan, right? Wanted to bring you out into the great outdoors to make a man of you?"

Sean nodded, his throat still hurt. "You been out here all night?"

"I don't know the place. This guy has skills, he tracked me and my brother all night. The only way to shake him off was to stand up to my guts in the river. He thought I'd turned back. I guess he hates unfinished business."

Sean watched the guns. "Your brother?"

The boy smiled and wiped his eye with the edge of his thumb. "Here. He's got the skill but we got the numbers. Don't try to hit him, just get his attention and I'll do the rest."

"I... I can't kill anyone. I can't be a murderer, I won't get into heaven. I won't see my dad again."

"Shut it! You know how to use a gun?"

"Only video games."

"Here. Click, aim. Kill. Piece of piss."

"Why's he doing this?"

"Since when did madness need a reason? Do I look like a shrink?"

"You gonna show me this river? If we run we can hide till morning, maybe."

"We ain't going anywhere."

"Excuse me?"

"You think I'm helping you to run away? I can do that myself. This guy wants to play? Ok, we'll play. Now he'll play both of us."

"Wait, don't-"

Bang! Bang!

The headlights exploded, flinging decorated glass in all directions and Sean crouched like the clouds had been torn apart and threw down their fury.

"What did you do that for? He's gonna be mad!"

"Stop being such a baby! You think he was gonna spank the back of our hands and let us go? He bought us here to get his kicks. We don't get nothing for second place, pal."

His eyes were wet and his knees unlocked so he had to sag back against the bark poking his back. "My mom. That bastard killed my mom. I hope that glass went in his eye!"

"Well, now you get to meet her again as he's got us."

The rifle cracked and speared through the tree. Sean thought it was the loudest thing he'd ever heard. Once, during a school trip to a distant castle, the staff re-enacting an old forgotten battle had fired a prop cannon and the boom had bust his ear drum, ensuring a visit to the nurse's office and missing the rest of the fun.

But not even that was loud. Not until the boy shot forward and started screaming.

The bullet had passed right through his shoulder, the force knocked him forward flat on his face. "Ah, Jesus, it hurts! God, it hurts so much!"

Sean heard the hunter laughing, coming down the hill.

"Hey man, he's still alive. He's still-"

"I know he fucking is," the boy wailed, opening his mouth to the dark but the blood drowned his words. "Don't leave me, please! Please don't leave me!"

"All right, here. Here, hold my gun." Sean crouched, helped him up to his feet, turned his head as the boy screamed in his face.

"Sorry, I know it hurts. Come on."

"Left," the boy said. "The river's over there."

Bang!

Sean felt something fly past his ear, saw a branch snap and fall at a funny angle from its mother.

"Over there, over there!"

"I can't see nothing."

Obligingly, a gunshot lit up his field of vision for a milli-second as bright as day. He was no football star; his dad had bought him out here to toughen him up. A life of fast food had filled his veins with fat, making him sluggish. He howled as his legs gave out and inadvertently used the boy as a cushion when he hit the ground.

"You stupid-"

"I'm sorry. Look, this is no good. I gotta go for help. Give me a gun."!

"No, don't leave me. Please, I'm no good alone."

"I'll be back, let me go. He's coming!"

“Don’t leave me, you bastard! I’ll haunt you! You’ll never be rid of me. I’ll haunt you for the rest of your days, I swear to God!”

Sean struck his hand and staggered toward the trees, jumping as he heard a following bang. The boy had fired at him.

“Hey - hey! Come back, please!”

Click - clack.

The hunter slowly walked into the clearing. The hot brass bullet ejected from the chamber of his rifle as he approached, limping. His right leg was torn at the knee and headlight glass sparkled once in his ripped flesh. “Oh it’s you. I thought I’d seen the last of you, boy. You’re more a runner than a fighter. I guess your mother got the better genes.”

“I’m done running. Get it over with.”

“Which way did the other one go?”

“Do you ever wash? You stink of booze, old man.”

“I tired of the tame creatures in these parts, boy. I move onto hunting bigger game and this is all you give me? Working in an office, that is a slow death. Living without the shadow of death is the worst thing a man can do for forgetting fear is forgetting how precious life is. Wouldn’t you give everything you own and breathe to see tomorrow?”

“I’d give anything to shut you up! You gonna shoot me, or bore me to death?”

“Can you feel the buzz between us?” The hunter aimed. “How disappointing. I rather like a chase.”

Bang!

The boy opened his eyes as Sean raised the gun again. The bullet had hit the hunter in the foot. Sean had aimed for his head but the recoil had nearly knocked the weapon out his hand and thrown his aim out the window. “Down, get down!”

The hunter reached for the weapon that had fallen from his hand.

Bang! Bang!

Sean fired twice more. His adrenaline made his hands shake so the first bullet removed the hunter’s left ear and the second sank uselessly into the ground beside his hip.

“Damn it, man, aim!” the boy said, but the hunter relaxed. Teeth gnashed as he used one hand to clamp the blood hosing from his three remaining toes on one foot and raised the other half heartedly to show he was unarmed.

"It's ok. I got him. I got him," Sean said. "He ain't going anywhere."  
Bang! Bang!

The boy fired twice and the hunter's head exploded like a fist holding a firework. His left hand still hung in the air in a surrendering gesture, his body twitched, nerves still receiving dimming signals. Finally he lay down. Stilled.

"Now he's not." The boy smiled like his body knew the paradise of morphine. He dropped the gun and held his shoulder. "Thank you. I thought you ran out on me."

"Why the hell did you do that? We had him."

"At least now you get to go to heaven. You got a name?"

"Er - Sean."

"You smoke, Sean?"

"No..."

"Eddie. Take a seat, Sean. You gotta get some rest."

"What for?"

"If you're not gonna give me a cigarette then you're gonna be some use and carry me to his car. Check his pocket for keys. Come on; when we get to town don't forget to tell them I was the one who shot him. It's not every day you get to be a hero."

"Anyone tell you you're a real pain in the behind?"

"Only one guy and I just shot him in the face. You wanna be my friend or you wanna be in my way?"

Sean winced as he sat down, the marshy ground sagging beneath his wet rump, moulding the shape of him. "Here. I got some candy, not as good as cigarettes, I guess."

Eddie laughed and shook his hand. "Where you been all my life?" His smile eased as a thought doused his mood. "You know how to drive, right?"

"I'm eight, course I can't drive. Besides, we ain't goin' anywhere."

"Excuse me?"

"You're right, you know, that guy was nuts. But you got to respect your blood. I was gonna kill him myself one day."

"Sean, you're not making sense."

"Oh it's very simple. He calls himself a huntsman and he can't even kill a kid. Loser. So he gets another child to draw you out, to bring you out that damn river, acting the hero. Instead of running you walked right towards

me. You know what they say, you get more bees with honey than vinegar.” He cocked the gun and put it to Eddie’s chest.

“I want you to know I’m not doing this because you killed my dad, but because you did it before I could.”

Eddie tried to stand but the gun slipped from his blood smeared fingers. “He was your dad?”

“The penny drops, genius. I was always good at stories. I’ll make a good one for the papers.”

Bang!

Up in the dark skies, scared birds took flight and Sean watched the fat moon come out from behind the clouds.

“I’ll be damned. I’m king of the jungle!” He laughed, then made his way toward the car. He knew how to drive as well as shoot.

## **A Chance Encounter On A Dark And Nameless Street**

***Ken L. Jones***

Before I first met her I used to want to be a policeman and in fact was going to start that process the very next week after all this began. I was pretty well assured of reaching that goal because I'd been in the military police during my whole time overseas in Iraq. Everything about how I came to find her flew in the face of all my other experiences with women and love. Never before had I picked up a complete stranger and certainly not one that I had seen just walking down a busy street in the town I've lived in most of my life. Never before had I gone into the sleazy bar that I followed her into with its low lights and loud obnoxious music throbbing. Never before had I gone up to a total stranger like I did with her and then immediately followed her out into the dark alleyway behind this bar that I'd never been in before, within mere minutes of doing so, with the implicit understanding that we were going to make love out there.

Never had I been so smitten, so incautious, so unprotected as I was under the spell of this perfect looking woman, this most desirable of all females, this nameless vixen who was all over me as if she was trying to urge every inch of me deep inside her and I thought that was what I wanted too until I realized as I looked over her shoulder while we attempted to merge into one conglomerate being that I saw that she cast no reflection in the highly polished plate glass window on the building across from us.

As if trying to prove that I still had a will of my own, I somehow managed to maneuver our tryst over to a high pile of empty wooden crates that had once held exotic bottles of imported beer from Singapore. I somehow shoved both of us into them just as her fangs found my jutting jugular vein. The force of us doing this shattered the thin slats of the boxes. I grabbed one long fragment of one them on the fly and rammed it with all the might I could muster deep through her heart, thanking God almighty as I did so that I had seen a horror movie or two in my time and had paid attention to the particulars of how such creatures are dispatched.

Then, as I fought hard to catch my breath, my heart sank as I realized that two officers in a prowler car had witnessed all of this and that I had no way to prove anything else other than the fact that I had just killed a young girl.

What followed was even more surreal and dreamlike as I was taken into custody and removed to police headquarters where I was questioned at length and spent the night in a cell, even after I told them exactly what had happened and that I had been planning on beginning my training as a policeman next week as well as detailing my military experience. Thinking that not only would I not become a policeman now but would stand trial for murder in the first degree and likely would be convicted, I spent a long nightmare plagued sleep in that uncomfortable cage and was surprised when nothing like that happened the next morning. Instead found myself signing special papers and then, after being vetted quickly, was deputized on the spot and that very evening I was initiated into a top secret vampire exterminating division of my local PD which I quickly rose to head.

To my eternal luck, the blood sucker that I had the good fortune to dispatch had killed the mayor's son a month or two before this, so my disposing of her had opened many important new doors for me that night and I walked through them gladly. Now hoping to not sound too immodest, I am proud to say that vampires who are foolish enough to come to our town soon wish that they hadn't.



## **Power Outage**

*David Frazier*

Power off three days  
Hot summer boiling away  
At home sweating  
Never get it back,  
I'm betting.

Can't breathe  
Can't sleep  
Can't find a cool spot  
Solution:  
Seven Eleven bought ice  
Filled bathtub to the gills  
Wow, that's cold!  
Didn't last long.

Left hottest part of day  
Hung out at Starbuck's  
Go to the library  
Anywhere cool  
Till nightfall.

In my domain darkened  
Grabbed, choked, pummeled and screwed  
What else to do?  
Butcher knife fumbled, found  
Slashed till they hit the ground  
Ran away  
Blood ruined carpeting  
I have been set free  
From inhumanity.

## **The Darkness Of Punishment**

*Olivia Arietti*

Horace was surrounded by darkness. It enwrapped his body and soul like a bleak shroud with the consistence of eternity. There was no way out. He could feel it physically, mentally; his limbs and spirit were enfolded in that black shadow that had become his prison impeding whatever movement of escape, whatever beat of the heart or wandering of the mind. A wall with a wide range of shades of the obscure colour, from pitch-black to raven black, from ebony to anthracite, from midnight to hell, lay before him.

Had he reached the depth of a nightmare, the heart of the bleakest forest or plummeted down the funnel to the middle of the earth? Never would he be able to find his way out or climb up. Perhaps he had fallen into the profoundest pit or was already in the viscera of hell. The last possibility frightened him immensely, although he couldn't feel its blaze. For sure, he was living an interminable night that had forever lost its day.

The location of his body puzzled Horace deeply. He endeavoured to go back in time and find a clue that could explain or reveal the reason of such a punitive obscurity.

Probably that was the price of his wickedness and he was experiencing the extreme darkness of vice, murder and perversion. He had always associated evil with darkness and although his mind was distorted and his heart as cold as if hibernated, the hideous fellow clearly perceived that his innumerable crimes could have been the cause of his present doom even if he didn't understand exactly in what amount or manner.

The monster, that's how he overheard his own father addressing him, was born ugly. His ugliness was such that his features appeared deformed; a horrifying figure that had little in common with his human similar. Even his parents were ashamed to take him out for a stroll or to send him to a public school. His mother in particular always disdained the child and deprived him of whatever love and care.

The boy grew up isolated, nourishing hate and resentment towards nature that had made him so repellent and envy towards those who had been bestowed with beautiful looks. When he reached adulthood, he resolved to carry out his revenge.

His craving for beauty was such that it paralleled the profound grief for its lack. In his insanity, Horace conceived the idea that the fortunate creatures who possessed that virtue, had to be punished. Therefore, besides being a monster, he turned into a horrid brute.

Young and lovely bodies had become the objects of his hunt. His plans were always extremely accurate, a most evil persecution; the immense satisfaction for their accomplishment was his well-deserved reward.

Once he had set his eyes on the victims, he spied on them with the sly intent to find out their weaknesses and, eventually, secrets. Soon after, with the most subtle but convincing manners, Horace would lure them into following him. Despite his disgusting aspect, they all accepted his vicious invitation.

When the prey was within the walls of his home, he stabbed the poor fellows in the back with a straight lethal blow to avoid ruining the front aspect of their beautiful bodies. Then he undressed them and admired their perfect silhouettes for quite a long time before letting his perverted hand slip slowly on the smooth corpses; he wanted to accede to his senses so cruelly humiliated, their share of pleasure.

After his macabre fantasies had been appeased, the punitive expedition began; the psycho horribly maimed the bodies with such rage and violence that the sight of his wild face with bloodshot eyes and frothing mouth would have been more terrorising than the view of the martyred bodies itself. Mainly, Horace was sadistically fierce in maiming the female ones, such was his hate towards his mother; a sort of ravenous brutality drove his knife and their blood sprouted all over him, smearing his face, hands and soul.

Once the dismemberment had been completed, he got rid of the corpses.

The gruesome excitement was over and revenge achieved.

The brute managed to commit the crimes without raising any sort of suspicions; probably, the fact was due to his secluded life or isolated dwelling. No one cared for him or for his victims. Of course, he always made sure they were strangers, beautiful young strangers.



One day Horace began having trouble with his sight. Images became blurred and he found it difficult to move around with the same ease and swiftness he had before. He couldn't let that happen for those qualities were too essential for his mischievousness. Therefore, he resolved to see a doctor. Unfortunately, the fellow was young and most handsome.

The oculist, after an accurate examination, during which he swung over and over the beam of his penlight from one pupil to the other, stiffened and turned white. His agitation couldn't be concealed. The apparent disease was so rare that the specialist was unable to specify its nature. While he was writing down a prescription, his hand was shaking. The pallor that had whitened his face conveyed a sad melancholic look brightened by a strange sparkle of the eyes; his lips, too, were slightly trembling; to the madman's eyes, the doctor's grimace of dread appeared as an irresistible smile.

Horace grew wild with desire to punish the beautiful creature and used all his most persuasive and subtle arts to lure his new victim. As usual, he succeeded.

Perhaps the specialist felt the urge to investigate more into his patient's life, frightened but at the same time attracted by the horror sensed during the medical examination.

Perversion, too, had its alluring appeal and the psycho was aware of that.

Naturally, the guy went through the same ritual and ended up dismembered like all his predecessors.

The strong craving for the doctor's body made Horace overlook the fact he wasn't a stranger. On realising that, he took more precautions and cut the corpse in smaller parts; this time he resolved to burn them in his own fireplace.

Probably punishment and the most severe condemnation were finally on their way for the hideous criminal, too, for a very strange event occurred.

As soon as the pieces of bleeding flesh were placed on the logs, the flames grew wild, prey to an uncontrollable force and began stretching out to the brute's body while ashes and cinders flew towards him as if aiming at a precise target.

The pain and the suffocating smoke made him collapse to the floor.

Of course, he wasn't aware of what happened afterwards.

In the few moments Horace recovered some of his senses, he heard a hollow voice saying, "The guy's dead, let's take him away."

Suddenly the monster realised the cause of the obscurity surrounding him. The certainty of the revelation made him shudder and scream in horror. In vain, for he was already in the darkness of his grave, buried alive in the metal coffin where his screams couldn't be heard, not strong enough to pierce the blackness that now had entrapped his mortal body and afterwards would forever imprison his hideous soul.

## Deceit

*A J Humpage*

The demon in his eyes unfurled.

Darkness descended quickly. Orange-tinted clouds rolled and billowed forward, low in the sky. Grey layers began to form above the forest like a bank of fog.

The rain was coming.

Dan Porter closed the sash window. A few silvery beads of rain hit the pane, then some more, leaving intricate, vein-like threads clinging to the glass. Water reflected the low light from within the cottage as it rolled towards the window ledge, collecting along the sill like shuddering mercury pools.

A reflection in the glass caught his eye.

Her shadow moved.

He turned to face his 15-year-old stepdaughter, Louise. His gaze lingered longer than necessary, but it wasn't the first time he'd secretly appraised her.

Her dark hair flowed around her shoulders, released from the ponytail that she always wore. It softened her delicate features and made her look somehow older. Beautiful. More appetizing.

He licked his lips; a subconscious movement that even he wasn't aware of because he was thinking too much about what was to come. His expression seemed cold, despite his deceptive smile.

A stilted silence curled around them. The rain came heavier against the windows, quickly replacing the soft hush of the previous hour with a soft hiss.

Louise finally moved. "I want to go for my shower, but it's freezing up there." She glanced at the fire in the hearth, not yet swollen with deep yellow flames. "I'll want to warm myself when I come down. Can you stoke the fire or something?"

His blue eyes glittered through the darkness, easily pulling her into his gravitational field like a drifting, wayward satellite. His voice sounded like sandpaper against the undulating air between them. "Yeah sorry, love. I'll go and get some more wood."

Her tongue flicked behind the curl of her lip. “Good, ‘cos it always gets cold in this place, especially upstairs. My other stepdad never got round to installing the central heating, but he always kept some firewood in the shed. You should find plenty in there. There’s a torch in the utility cupboard in the kitchen.”

The other stepdad had died a few years back. Tragic.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get it nice and toasty by the time you’ve had your shower,” Dan said, glancing at the time. It was approaching 6.30 and he needed to call Diane – Louise’s mother – to let her know they got to the cottage okay. They had left London that morning to begin their long weekend in the serene and picturesque surrounds of the Lake District.

Diane would follow as soon as she finished work. He knew how much she was looking forward to it because she’d been talking about it for weeks. She had planned a cosy romantic weekend break for them both.

He’d planned death.

He removed the mobile phone from his shirt pocket and dialled Diane’s number. It went straight through to her voicemail. He knew that she was driving, otherwise she would have answered. “Hey, it’s me. We got here okay. We’re just settling in. The fire is stoked and I got a bottle of red waiting for you. Watch out for the rain. See you soon.” He placed the phone on the side table and grabbed his jacket from the back of the sofa.

Louise stopped on the stairway and watched him.

Dan opened the utility cupboard in the kitchen and found the torch. He noticed Louise watching him, her expression galvanised with a frosty veil. She was quite still, askance eyes silently gauging him.

He knew Diane would arrive soon, perhaps within the next hour or so. He calculated that if she had left work at lunchtime, as planned, she’d be in Cumbria by eight o’clock, traffic permitting. An hour before her arrival didn’t seem long, but he had a higher purpose in mind other than stoking the fire. He desperately wanted to take Louise before Diane arrived. There would be enough time afterward – the whole weekend – to enjoy the girl, and her mother, even more.

He closed the cupboard and opened the back door to the darkness.

There was little wind – just the soft hiss of the rainfall through the trees, and a hint of coolness on his tongue. He stepped out and panned the torch across the darkness. An eerie clouded forest glowed briefly in the

flashlight before sinking back into the blackness. Water cascaded down his face and into his mouth. It tasted tinny.

He made his way down a narrow path towards the outbuilding. Slick paving slabs glowed beneath his torch light. The rickety old shed gradually emerged from the gloom.

He lifted the latch and stepped inside, listened to the downpour as it drummed softly against the corrugated roof and echoed through the air. Dust particles flitted through the amber torch beam. Thick, gauzy cobwebs wavered in the draught seeping through old dusted windows. He sensed movement, flashed the torch.

Long-legged shadows scuttled along the far wall.

He shone the torch around the worktops, gazed at the stacked firewood by the windows. He slowly grazed the light across rusty tools hanging from hooks on the far wall. A large shovel stood against the worktop.

But it was not the spade that interested him, but rather the large rusty screwdriver on the edge of the counter. Placed there two weeks previously on his first visit to check the place out. The metal glinted in the flashlight, making his eyes dilate and his mouth salivate. He could almost hear its raw sound, the squelch of cold metal against bone. It would cause maximum damage and minimum fuss.

Adrenaline squirted into his stomach at the thought of driving it into Louise's skull and a reactive pulse shot into his groin. He grabbed the screwdriver and slipped it into his back pocket.

He moved the shovel to the corner, by the door and then reached for the thick logs. He managed three in his arms and made his way back outside. Despite the gloom and the rain, movement distracted him and he glanced up; saw Louise hovering at the window like a distorted reflection. Her shirt was open, revealing the soft roundness of pert young breasts, but she remained expressionless behind the glass and there was something in her haunted, pale aura that intrigued him, invited him.

She vanished from view.

He pulled the logs tight into his chest and angled the torch towards the back door. Silver flecks of drizzle danced in the torchlight and guided him back towards the door.





Louise stepped out of the shower and grabbed a nearby towel. She quickly dried herself to stave off the encroaching cold.

Beyond the bathroom door, the darkness heaved and the stairway creaked against the silence.

She looked up, held herself still for a moment and listened. No other sound came.

The light from the bathroom cast an eerie glow cross the landing and stretched toward the stairs. She half expected a shadow to jump out at her, but there was no evil shapes lurking, except in her imagination. Tentatively she eased forward and peered around the door.

Through the slender banister rails guarding the stairs, she spotted Dan's shadow in the front room, stoking the fire. She lingered for a moment, watched him. Her skin prickled and it made her shudder. She returned to the light, quickly dressed in fresh underwear and left the bathroom.



Dan looked up at the thick umbra clinging to the stairs and landing; saw her shadow from her bedroom doorway casting elfin sprites across the walls. The heat from the fire warmed him, though in his mind he was thinking of a different heat.

He made sure the screwdriver was still in the back pocket of his trousers and slowly ascended the stairs. He reached the top and stood at the edge of the darkness clouding the hallway. The silence listed, awkward against his intentions.

The light from her room cast a harsh diagonal slash through the dark.

He oozed forward, placed a hand against her door and slowly swung it open.

She was sat facing the mirror, dressed in her underwear, her long, damp hair caressing the small of her back.

Darkened thoughts pounded his frontal lobe like a persistent headache.

Two years had drifted by since he first met her mother, a middle-aged widow. At first, his disposition was naturally cautious with her, after all, she had just lost her husband in a terrible freak accident. But Dan remained patient and she soon became besotted with her new spunky younger boyfriend, because it seemed that the more attention Dan lavished upon her, the more yielding Diane, and her daughter, became.

Dan was particularly choosy about widows. He only showed interest in those with money. He rarely stayed longer than a couple of years with any of them – it never took long to establish himself and offer the kind of sex and companionship they craved, because the best way to mould and manipulate them – but this widow came with a prize worth the effort of entering into marriage with her – her newly acquired fortune from her late husband.

And this one came with an added bonus: the girl.

Of course, thirteen was a little too young for his tastes, so for the last two years he had patiently waited for the onset of puberty. And now Louise was ripe and oozing sexual odour.

She would be his first child. He wanted to savour it.

Sometimes the urges felt like a strong wind, blowing anti-clockwise around his mind, whipping up the dust and debris before settling swiftly into dark recesses. He had no control over them, especially since Louise's recent flirtations had grown with vigour. He knew the esoteric glances, the calculated flashing of her legs or a naked shoulder served only to entice him into her subtle sexual games, right under her mother's nose.

She often teased him, always away from her mother's attention. She knew what she was doing, playing with his displaced affections. He reciprocated her cat and mouse act, surreptitiously enjoying the moments she would deliberately brush past him with knowing glances, and yet he somehow kept from imploding.

He had been looking forward to the chance to get both of them alone. He'd been planning it for months, a way of first getting at Louise, then her mother. The cottage was perfect; located at the edge of a forest, isolated. No one around for miles. No interruptions. No distractions. And no help.

And the best part of his entire plan meant that he could do what he wanted once he'd killed them; that he could entertain and realise his dark fantasies – he could do what he wanted with them. Then bury them.

He'd planned the entire trip in detail and had travelled to the cottage several weeks earlier to make sure the plan would work. It was a pretty and idyllic little place, no one would know of the events about to unfold behind closed doors. He told Diane that he was working away for the weekend – plausible for her, despite the lie, since he was a company manager who had to travel to business meetings and conferences. He had planned everything. Right down to the kind of well-rehearsed lies he would tell the police about

them being attacked and the women abducted. He had all weekend to stage it.

His fantasies were growing darker and his urges were swelling with each kill that he'd made, but so was his fortune. He had no actual interest in Diane, other than to kill her, to finish what he'd started two years ago, and to procure her fortune. Not only that, but he would gain the townhouse back in London, and the cottage by the lake. All of it would become his. Just as it stipulated in her will.

Then he could move on to the next poor bitch.

Movement brought him to, and he glanced up.

Enticed, he crept forward.

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Louise knew he'd crept in. She didn't turn in the seat, but instead spoke over her shoulder. "I wondered how long it would take you."

He knew what she meant. "Longer than expected, obviously."

"I know exactly what you want."

He advanced. "Is that why you've been prick-teasing me for hours? Hanging around half dressed, sitting here in your frilly underwear."

"Don't complain. You either want it or you don't. We got enough time before she arrives," she said. Delivered matter-of-fact.

An invitation, he saw it.

Minutes. That's all it took to for him sweep her from the dresser and pin her to the bed, but there was no affection in his movements, no kisses and no tenderness. Instead he pawed at her underwear and pushed against her with his weight. With one hand he clutched her slender neck. He forced his other hand into her knickers.

Her stomach contracted and churned, but she let him continue, after all she had silently invited him. She squeezed her eyes shut, as though to shut out is foul presence. Fluid spilled from her pores and dribbled down her face; perspiration, not tears, despite the cool air. Her skin flushed.

He could smell her fragility, despite her bravado. He knew his roughness hurt her, which excited him and her whimpers made him swell. He quickly unzipped himself, forced her into the tangled bedclothes. His eyes glazed.

Her body stiffened against him; the intent in his solid expression.

He sensed hesitation. 'Don't tell me you've gone all shy now.'

'No...' she managed to say.

He found his way between her legs. "All that flirting you've been doing, the looks and the licking of your lips. You think I haven't noticed it? Or the short skirts and that deep red lipstick you wear all the time?" He grinned then, to mock. "You're a grubby little bitch. This what you do with all the boys you've had?"

"You're the first," she said instantly, agitated at his accusation.

His expression wavered momentarily. "Liar. You're just begging for it."

Her face creased with scorn. "If I'm the grubby bitch, then you're a lying two faced cheating bastard."

The sentiment made him smile. He pushed hard against her with his weight. "So that's how you want it, huh?"

When there was no reply, he forced himself inside her.

She winced against the pain and her skin sickened, but she remained mute against him; a willing yet silent participant.

The more intensely he looked at her pain, the more excited he became. He slipped his right hand behind his back and grabbed the screwdriver from the back pocket of his trousers.

Tears soon formed in her eyes, gluing together her eyelids.

The smell of sweat clung to the air like dusted particles and the sound of sex sullied the silence, but another sound broke through the strained atmosphere and it made Dan stop.

The slow *dip... dip... dip* of dripping water filtered through the hallway.

He looked to the darkness beyond the bedroom door, his heartbeat stifling his thoughts. He turned back to Louise's contorted face, her eyes clouded with fear. He continued, but the constant dripping sound made him look again at the doorway. He thought the sound was drawing closer.

A sound spilled from Louise's mouth; hot breath over cold lips. 'No... don't stop...'

Dan looked down at her, puzzled. He had been right about her bravado, her flirtations had been a way of enticing him and she seemed to like it rough and forced. His grip tightened around her throat; a red handprint seared her alabaster flesh. He had to finish it, had to kill her and almost instantly the dripping sound was forgotten. He continued to thrust, his body pinning her to the bed as he neared orgasm.

He clutched the screwdriver tight, swiftly aimed it at the centre of her skull, right between her eyes.

She saw it and her eyes shot wide, body jolted. Her gargled voice reverberated around the room and bounced off the walls.

He held her firm, ready to thrust the tool toward her face.

A scream punctured the silence and startled the darkness into momentary retreat, quickly followed by a sharp slicing sound of metal against something firm and malleable. The sound of a body thudding to the wooden floor was quickly followed by a long, pitiful moan which clung to the room for some time before eventually weakening and then dwindling into the silence.



Blood oozed across the wooden floorboards. The table lamp flickered from the floor where it had fallen, intermittently highlighting startled, ghostly faces.

The body sprawled near the bed twitched for a while as severed nerve endings struggled to function. Deep red sinew and cartilage glistened; muscle bulged through the deep laceration across the neck. Veins continued to pump blood for a short while.

Diane Porter threw down the shovel. Droplets of rain threaded down her face. She looked at her daughter.

Louise scowled. “What the hell took you so long? A second later and he would have rammed that screwdriver right through my skull. He could have friggin’ killed me.”

Diane stared down at her husband, his arms and legs still twitching. The bony edges of Dan’s spine poked through the sliced muscle and seemed the only thing keeping his half-decapitated head attached to his neck.

“I couldn’t find the damn shovel,” Diane gasped, sloughing the rain from her raincoat. “Son of a bitch must have moved it.” She stepped over the body. “And I couldn’t find the torch either.”

“Dan had it,” Louise said. “He went to get some firewood...” She took in a breath. “That was one hell of a whack you gave him.”

“It needed to be to take him out.”

“I had to let him do *that*,” Louise said, disdained.

It didn't seem to bother Diane. "But it was worth it, it's done." She couldn't hide her growing exhilaration. "Christ, we did it, Lou. I can't believe it went pretty much exactly as we planned it. You had him right where we wanted him."

Louise looked unimpressed. It wasn't the first time she'd done it; let the men take her. Her voice remained cold. "It was two years of deception well spent then, don't you think?" She stared down at her dying stepfather. "The bastard didn't see that coming."

Diane's eyes were like blackened stones. She smiled through the deceit. "At last, all his money and property is ours."

Dan had been the third man they had despatched in the last four years. A rich stupid fool.

Louise slowly wiped Dan's spattered blood from her mouth and neck. At last she found reason to smile. She licked her lips, tasted his blood. And now that the fear had subsided, the adrenaline surged through her and purged the sensation. Her entire body tingled.

The sweeping urges inside her were strong, needy, but that was the trouble with deceit. It was like an unrelenting addiction – and she couldn't wait to do all it over again.

## **My Night with Xavier Hibbert**

*C.D. Carter*

Joy overwhelmed pain when a black Chevy Tahoe with specialty steel bars bulging from and above its front bumper smashed into my rickety fourteen-year-old Mercury Sable with one hundred and ninety-eight thousand miles on its tired frame.

My car was old. I was out of work. I needed money. Finally, payday.

I had just pulled into a 7-11 parking lot near my apartment, hoping the nine dollars in my pocket would be enough for peanut butter, bread and a Diet Sprite – dinner for me and my little girl. Like I said, I was busted. Dead busted.

I was reaching for the door handle when the monstrous vehicle rammed into my feeble Sable, sending the car's front tires skidding onto the sidewalk just a few feet from the 7-11 entrance. My seatbelt had been undone, so the hit sent my forehead into the steering wheel.

Before I could even register that blood was dripping from my right eyebrow, a man was at the driver's side window. He wore a blue long-sleeved thermal shirt that hugged his pectorals and abs, tight black jeans, black leather gloves and a motorcyclist's helmet with a mirrored visor. I looked up into that helmet's reflection to see myself wide-eyed and dabbing blood from above my right eye.

I rolled down the window and tried to speak, but he beat me to it.

"You violated the basics of roadway decorum," the man said in an even, monotone voice. "You changed lanes on Rockville Pike without signaling. You cut off a woman driving a white Hyundai Sante Fe. Please be more careful in the future."

I guess I rubbed the back of my neck – which stiffened like a two-by-four the day after the accident – because the man said, "Get your neck fixed, courtesy of the Neck Correction Fund."

He reached into his jeans pocket and withdrew a wad of cash, held the money inside my driver's side window, waited until I reached for it and tossed the bills in my face. The green presidential faces cascaded across my front seats. There were a bunch of twenties, a few fives and tens and a shitload of hundreds – so many hundreds.

Two thousand four hundred and seventy dollars lie on the seats and floor mats of the Sable that wasn't worth half that much.

I looked up from the scattered cash-money and the man with the helmet was gone, back behind the wheel of his armored Tahoe, backing up and turning around to leave the 7-11 parking lot.

Don't misunderstand: The money was nice. But I wanted something more from this guy; I wanted his story. I ran after his Tahoe in the 7-11 parking lot and knocked on his passenger side door as he waited for traffic to clear. He took one look at me and drove away, still wearing his helmet with the visor slid down.

That was how I met Xavier Hibbert.



I'm a journalist, or was a journalist. Maybe I wasn't a journalist. I never had a badge, never a press pass with my smiling mug attached. I've been known to write for money – let's just say that.

Those were better days.

I didn't major in journalism and have no formal training outside of obsessively reading newspapers, magazines, news sites and the backs of various cereal boxes since I was a very young, very precocious child. I dropped out of college after my sophomore year because I discovered I could make a living by freelancing, finding juicy stories in the nation's capital and setting up bidding wars between publications. Pitting magazines against each other, it turned out, made for a nice chunk of change every couple months.

My freelancing gig began at a bar called Jerry O'Harry's in Rockville, Maryland, a D.C. suburb with an overabundance of pre-planned shopping areas designed to look like authentic downtowns. Jerry O'Harry's was in one of these make-believe downtowns.

I was sitting there, waiting for Suzy – my date – not quite drunk but certainly not sober, when I overheard two grizzly old men talking over the din. The fat one said to the skinny one, "The son of a bitch just swallowed the damn diamond, just plop, right down the shooter." They laughed hysterically and finished their beers.

Suzy wasn't due at Jerry O'Harry's for another twenty minutes, so I let my curiosity lead me. A voice within needed to know who had gulped



down a diamond and why the hell he did it. I asked the thin old man with sunken blue eyes who, exactly, had swallowed a diamond. The guy gave a long, measured look, hedged and turned around. I was persistent and asked again.

“Can’t tell no-one,” the man said, his breath rich with hops. The men were longtime Montgomery County police officers who worked desk jobs at the department’s Rockville headquarters. They heard all variety of wacky police stories and here was the latest: A guy broke into a high-end jewelry store in Chevy Chase a few days back. No criminal mastermind, the man had tripped the store’s silent alarm. The cops got there and found the intruder rummaging through a glass case of presumably pricey diamonds. The officers told the man to step away from the case and to lie on the floor and he did just that. But before he did, he reached into the case, grabbed a diamond worth a hundred grand and popped it in his mouth. He swallowed, smiled and followed orders.

“So they haul the guy’s ass back to the station and have no clue what to do next,” the pudgy cop said to me. “Then one of the rookies has a brilliant idea: Stuff the shithead full of fiber. Make him shit out the diamond.” He leaned back and roared with laughter.

The Montgomery County cops made the jewelry thief eat a whole box of high-fiber cereal. They made him take a handful of fiber pills. They even force-fed him those chocolate fiber bars. The thief was on the toilet for most of the next twenty-four hours and the rookie cop – since it was his brilliant idea – was told to sift through the results of the fiber overload. He found nothing, so they did an X-ray. Turns out X-rays can’t detect diamonds, so that was a wash.

“Poor bastard is still in county lockup, just shittin’ away,” the skinny cop said. “And Malcolm keep pumpin’ him with fiber pills and all the rest.”

Malcolm – the rookie officer. That’s all I needed. I texted Suzy to tell her I wasn’t feeling well and that I was headed home. She responded with an ice-cold “ok.” Whatever. I was preoccupied.

I walked into the Montgomery County police headquarters and casually asked for Malcolm. The uniformed woman at the front desk said he had just left the station and pointed to a young, black officer as he approached his cruiser. I ran out and met him there.

I told Malcolm Tobe that I was a reporter and that I had heard about his fiber-based diamond-extraction plan. He looked embarrassed and then

angry. He asked me who had told me. He asked me who I worked for. “The Post,” I said, lying effortlessly, as is my wont. Malcolm Tobe denied everything.

So I bluffed. I told Malcolm that I was going to run with the story as-is and if he had anything to clarify, he better do it now. When he still wouldn’t bite, I caved: I offered him anonymity. A lot of newspapers and magazines shunned anonymous sources for anything but stories about secret CIA prisons, or anything on which the lives of many hinged. But if this story was as good as I suspected, someone would take it, damn the anonymity.

It turned out the thief had undergone two more X-rays that revealed four cubic zirconium diamonds lodged in his intestines. “Dude has a fetish for eating diamonds,” Malcolm said. “He told me he’s eaten twenty or thirty. It gets him off or something.”

And there it was. I had my story. I made a few obligatory calls to the owner of the jewelry store and the county police’s official spokeswoman. They had very little to say, as expected. I wrote the story and emailed it to four magazines in D.C. and Maryland. Two said no within the hour. One admonished me for quoting anonymously.

Days passed. I questioned my news judgment. Was a criminal defecating diamonds not intriguing? That’s when the managing editor of The Washington Citizen responded and said she loved my work and that it would be her cover story for the following month. Would fifty cents per word be adequate, she asked. Yes, I said, that would do.

I cashed my check for nine hundred and thirteen dollars the next week.

The Washington Citizen assigned me a series of four stories that paid even more than the piece about a criminal’s expensive bowel movements. My byline circulated, as did my reputation and within six months, I was working regularly for three magazines, one of them a well-funded extreme right-wing rag that paid too well to turn down on principle.

Freelancers can’t afford to have principles. Hired guns don’t have consciences.

So things went well, I made lots of money for a couple years and bought a pricey brick-front home in Bethesda, in a neighborhood tucked alongside the sprawling National Institutes of Health. I asked Suzy to move

in with me, she said yes and approximately fifteen minutes later, she was knocked up.

I ramped up my freelancing regimen to make sure we could afford the bundle of unexpected joy. I was making more money than I could have ever hoped for – so much that Suzy quit her job as a secretary at a realtor's office.

Then I fucked up.

Long story shrunk to two hundred and eighty-five words: The Washington Citizen wanted a story for their September issue about fantasy football-obsessed Washingtonians. I found a group of Northern Virginians who had played fake football since before the commercial Internet – the Stone Age, in fantasy circles. I dropped in on their draft on a late August Sunday and found them to be somewhere between boring and insultingly dull. They were numbers geeks. They had spreadsheets filled with completion percentages, touchdown-to-interception ratios and yardage totals from the past ten seasons. There was no yelling during the draft, no insulting of one's mother, no gratuitous sexual gestures. One guy fell asleep halfway through the draft. In short, it was everything I hoped it wouldn't be and much, much more. So I ignored the journalism training I never had and wrote a fictional account of a group of fantasy freaks from Adam's Morgan in D.C. and how these diehards painted their faces and screamed at each for stealing quarterbacks known as "sleepers." One of my creations wept tears of joy when he snatched up the Dallas Cowboys' star running back. I created a range of quirky characters – seven in total – and sent it in to The Washington Citizen's copy editors. It took a couple days, but one of those bastards sniffed out an inconsistency and they challenged me to ease their fears. I did, but it wasn't enough. A Citizen editor called me and asked if I could set up a photo of the group. So I confessed. Within seventy-two hours, every major publication in D.C., Maryland and Virginia had heard about my dalliances with the Devil and sent me emails saying that their reputable magazine or newspaper was done with me, personally and professionally.

Relegated to the smallest community papers that paid about a tenth of what the Citizen and its peers paid, I went broke and did it in a hurry. Another long story condensed: Suzy had our baby, a pudgy blob of cuteness we named Sophia and promptly sank into postpartum depression. Suzy, a woman for whom I was very fond but never really loved – not nearly as

much as writing – coped with that post-baby sadness by, well, partying like a sorority girl in Tahiti. I watched her stay out late, come home stoned and wither away in front of tiny Sophia and me. Suzy left me to care for our daughter, a task I did with great resentment at first as my child's mother undid herself from all parental duties. But as my grudge for Suzy grew, my love for Sophia flourished. I had never loved anything half as much as that slobbering feces machine.

One November night a week after Thanksgiving, Suzy was picked up by a Ron Jeremy lookalike – driving, of all things, a tow truck from a company called Hoffman Brothers -- and never returned.

I answered my cell phone six hours later and talked to a Maryland state trooper who said Suzy, my baby's mother, had died in a car wreck, along with two others. The Ron Jeremy character, whose name was Hubert Finkeldorf, was a goner. So was a thirteen-year-old boy in the passenger seat of the other car. The driver was the thirteen year old's brother and he lived, I heard later, after being Medivaced to Johns Hopkins. I read in The Washington Post a long time later that the teenage driver had sunk into a three-month coma after the accident; he had all kinds of broken bones and burns, too. The Post said the driver – a scholarly, athletic black kid from southern Prince George's County – hadn't known his kid brother was dead until he woke up ninety days after. A fat lump of emotion was caught in my throat as I read that Post story. Suzy surely would've killed herself if she hadn't succumbed to internal bleeding.

Ah, Suzy - she had really picked a winner with that Ron Jeremy double, that Hubert Finkeldorf.

I should've visited the other driver in the hospital. Self-pity proved too powerful a deterrent. I never made it to Hopkins.

With no money and no Suzy, I rented my house to a University of Maryland professor from Uganda and moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Derwood, a postage stamped-sized alcove thirty miles from the D.C. border.

And that, as you might now guess, is why I wanted Xavier Hibbert's strange story after he plowed into me in the 7-11 parking lot. The two thousand in cash was a financial lifesaver, but I needed to know why this man had souped up his Chevy Tahoe, worn a motorcyclist helmet and rammed into my Sable in some attempt for vigilante justice after I had

lazily drifted from one lane into another on Rockville Pike and cut off someone in a white Hyundai.

Why did he care so much? Was he part of a network of roadway justice seekers? And that organization, the Neck Correction Fund – what was that? Answering this and selling the results to a big-time magazine was my ticket back into the freelancing game I once owned. I had committed a crime and done my sentence. And even if my name, Jerrod Collison, were atop every editor's blacklist, they'd be able to overcome their hatred of my byline when they read the incredible story of Xavier Hibbert.

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“What are we looking for again?” Sophia asked for the fourth time in fifteen minutes.

We were sitting in my Sable with the crunched backside in a Target parking lot off of Route 355, otherwise known as Rockville Pike, a row of commerce on one of the most expensive properties in the Western world. This had been the spot where I had presumably committed my roadway sin the day Xavier spotted me and followed me back to Derwood to deliver my penalty. I sat there with Sophia every day after her school let out and for three hours, we searched the crawling sea of vehicles for Xavier's truck.

“It's a black truck with bars all over,” I told my daughter, stifling my impatience. “It looks like it has teeth, actually.”

Sophia nodded her head and reached into the bag of gummy bears I had bought her. She filled her cheek with the sugary animals. It looked like she was chewing tobacco.

The falling sun was casting orange light over the parking lot when Sophia said she was hungry. I would've stayed all night – anything for a reunion with the Tahoe-driving psycho who had battered my Sable. But we drove back home and I made one of the three meals I have capable of preparing: Spaghetti with garlic bread.

“Again?” Sophia griped. Like always, she ate every last bite, thanked me and kissed me on the cheek. Such a good girl, one her mother would have loved deeply had she not loved getting messed up so damn much.

I had set up a Google alert for news stories with the following terms: “black Chevy Tahoe helmet accident leaving the scene injury cash money neck correction.” For three weeks, nothing. But finally, on that night after I

put Sophia to sleep under her Spiderman sheets, I had a live one. A local radio station's website had three paragraphs on a black SUV that had sideswiped a woman on Georgia Avenue near the exit for Interstate-495. The radio station's news blurb said the driver of the SUV had left "a pile of money" on the woman's backseat. The woman's injuries had been treated at the scene.

I was more than familiar with the area: My parents had taken me to church there as a kid. I called the teenage girl who lived with her aunt and uncle in the apartment above mine and paid her fifteen dollars to housesit for an hour, just in case Sophia woke up looking for daddy. That was fifteen dollars I did not have.

I violated a handful of road rules on the way there. Every time I looked at my rising speedometer, I felt dread rise in my throat, fearing the sudden presence of an angry black Tahoe trailing me down the Beltway. It was the first time I realized Xavier Hibbert fit the description of a terrorist. The man had instilled terror in me, as he probably had that woman on Georgia Avenue.

I stopped at a hole-in-the-wall called The Corner Pub and plopped down at the bar. Places of slow and steady alcohol consumption, as you now know, is where I've begun many of my best acts of journalism.

I nursed a Budweiser as to not look suspicious, but a clear, sober head would be the key to finding the man in the black truck, Xavier Hibbert. I asked the bartender if she had heard about the accident across the street, near the 495 west exit. With deep disinterest, she said no. It took ten minutes for a middle-aged drunken housewife three stools down to speak up.

"I heard about it on WTOP," she said with a controlled slur, naming the D.C.-area radio station that had broken the story. "Lucky girl if you ask me – the one who got hit. She got a pile of cash and all she had to do was play a little bumper cars."

I scanned the nearly empty Corner Pub for this woman's husband or forbidden lover, but she stared at her pink mixed drink with loneliness reserved for people drinking alone, with no prospects. I don't think she made eye contact with me the whole time.

"Heard that same guy has smashed into a few people up here on Georgia," she said, gesturing toward the road that ran from the most urban parts of D.C. to Maryland's cow country. "Like he patrols the street or

something. Must have some sort of super hero complex.” She finished off her drink. “Stupid shit.”

That sliver of information was all I could muster at eleven o’clock on a Wednesday night. I would’ve gone straight to the cops, but the accident happened just inside the border of Montgomery County. MoCo cops, as they’re known, had not been receptive to my requests since I got one of their rookies to confirm the story of the diamond eater and shitter. A county spokesman, a gruff geezer named Fritz Fallon, explained once a couple years earlier that I was “persona non grata” among Montgomery’s finest. I told Fritz that I deserved that. He laughed and hung up on me.

I left the sad, drunk woman at the Corner Pub, called the babysitter to ask for a two-hour extension and parked my car at a closed Shell gas station on Georgia. There I sat with the single mug of Budweiser heavy in my gut, my eyelids feeling like they had anchors tied to them, watching the vacant thoroughfare for forty-five minutes. Probably I succumbed to sleep a couple times, but it was only that micro-sleep that truckers get when they’ve been riding sixteen hours.

When I was a kid, a few months removed from my driving test, I found that driving made me terribly sleepy. The outside temperature did not matter, nor did the amount of heat or AC I blasted from the car vents, nor did the volume or kind of music that pumped from my speakers. The gentle hum of the engine and the staring contest with the road ahead made me hopelessly sleepy, even if I wasn’t tired. I didn’t dare tell my parents, but during these first months of driving, I thought I had found the answer to falling asleep behind the wheel: One-eyed naps. If my eyes demanded to shut, I would let them, but only one at a time. I’d give one eye a few seconds of rest, open it, and let the other one take a breather. Funny thing about one-eyed naps, though: The open eye is so often jealous of its resting counterpart that it too flutters shut, creating what we’d call a traditional nap. While driving. On the treacherous highways and byways of Washington, D.C. and its suburbs, always among the country’s worst three commutes.

It was during one of these one-eyed naps at a Shell gas station on Georgia Avenue that my one opened eye caught the shining black of Xavier Hibbert’s Chevy Tahoe. Adrenaline surged through me. It was suddenly possible to open both eyes. I started the car, took a wild right out of the Shell station and pursued the man whose story I wanted so desperately.

The Tahoe headed north on Georgia, past the towering steeple of the church I used to attend, and away from D.C. This was good. I could track him more easily in the openness of Georgia's more suburban parts. Keeping a safe distance, I made sure to obey every rule of the road. I even flicked on my right turn signal when Xavier changed lanes as he approached Arcola Avenue.

Like I said, it was late – a few minutes past midnight – so the road was mostly empty and the traffic lights blinked yellow and red, signaling drivers to either proceed cautiously or make a full stop before continuing. A poor fool a hundred yards in front of the vigilante black Tahoe swung his silver BMW onto Arcola without even pretending to stop at the flashing red light. The Tahoe sped up and I followed suit. Xavier's tires squealed as he threw his SUV around the right turn. I did the same a few seconds later. The Tahoe's engine roared to life as it flew downhill toward its target.

The BMW made its second terrible error at the next light. It was a tiny intersection with a street that led into a neighborhood, and the luxury sedan blew right through it, brake lights never bothering to so much as blink. I watched in equal parts amazement and horror as the Tahoe picked up more speed on Arcola and passed the BMW over the double yellow line to its left. Once he was a few dozen car lengths in front, Xavier jammed on his brakes and smoke rose from his tires. The BMW's nose sunk as it too braked hard. I followed along and smashed my Sable's brakes, cringing as they screamed in protest, metal on metal.

The standstill didn't last long.

The Tahoe's white reverse lights came alive and the truck's tires cried out again as it sped backward with its heavy black bars bearing down on its prey. I heard the crunch of car parts as if it was my car that had been hit again. The impact sent the late-model BMW sliding down Arcola Avenue. Five seconds passed and Xavier hopped out of his truck. He knocked politely on the driver's side window. From my vantage point, a few hundred yards back, I couldn't see if the driver refused Xavier's request. All I saw was the helmeted man step back and kick in the window with his heavy black boot. A wad of cash flew in the driver's face and Xavier walked back to his military-grade steed.

This was my chance.

I zipped past the BMW, ignored the twenty-something black woman crying hysterically to someone on the phone and swerved my Sable in front



of Xavier's Tahoe. He revved his engine and flashed his high beams. I still don't know what made me think he wouldn't ram into me – I had most definitely broken a rule of the road by swooping in front of him – but he didn't. I got out and approached the window, which had been rolled down.

I held up my cell phone and, with my best poker face, said, "I saw everything, I have pictures and I called the police."

Xavier had the ultimate poker face: No face at all. His helmet's reflective visor was down. Not even body language tipped his hand. I tensed my body like a man set before the firing squad with a countdown ringing in the air. There was no telling what ran through this man's mind. This was only the first time I came to this realization.

"What do you want? Money?"

"No," I said. "I want in. Let me in."

Xavier stared straight ahead, probably considering bulldozing my pathetic hoopty a few hundred feet down Arcola Avenue. He turned his helmeted head slightly and motioned for me to join him. I raced around to the passenger side and hopped in, just as the BMW driver limped out of her former masterpiece of German engineering and began howling obscenities at Xavier. She said she'd kill him. She said she'd choke him. Then she said she'd kill his family. Xavier put his Tahoe into reverse and slammed on the gas pedal. Again, the gnashing of glass and metal filled the quiet night as the BMW suffered another encounter with the SUV's unforgiving metal bars.

Xavier leaned out of his open window and said to the sobbing woman, "Remember, don't be an asshole on the road. It's bad for everyone. And if you do it again, it will be particularly bad for you."

Xavier's straightforwardness was admirable and to this day, two years and two months after my night around town in that hulking metal revenge machine, I believe seeing unrepentant assholes get what they deserve on the road was cathartic. No matter how much we stifle our darkest urges, or snuff out our most rage-filled, hateful thoughts, they live somewhere in us, festering, wanting out. We want to see bad things happen to bad people, especially those who have violated society's basic rules, like speed limits, stop signs and turn signals. Seeing bad fortune slither its way onto people we hate helps us make sense of our world. Good people deserve good, bad people warrant the opposite. Making this trade-off is our basest instinct and Xavier Hibbert acted on his.

Good for him. Shame on us.

Xavier zoomed away from the scene just as alternating blue and red lights could be seen turning off of Georgia Avenue onto Arcola. The woman, in all her theatrics, must have managed to tell the MoCo cops where the metro region's deliverer of roadway discipline had tracked her down.

For all the blatantly illegal things I had seen Xavier Hibbert do, he did not exceed the speed limit of thirty-five by more than two or three miles per hour. He wore a seatbelt straight out of NASCAR: Two bulky, cushioned straps fit snugly across his muscular torso. A heavy-duty seatbelt was also attached to the SUV's passenger seat.

I watched him keep both hands on the steering wheel, a recently cleaned and polished black that matched the dashboard and the seats. The Tahoe was a 2005, give or take a year, in pristine shape. The vehicle's immaculate conditioning did not match its smell – a vague scent of something old and earthy and, when I took a deep breath, stinging. I thought of little else but that stench for the first few minutes I rode in Xavier's truck. It seems impossible that I became accustomed to breathing in that offensive odor, but I did, somehow.

Raised above the center console was a bulky laptop sitting on what appeared to be metal food tray attached to legs that swiveled from side to side. I glanced at the computer's screen and saw a series of indecipherable math equations and bar and pie graphs. Above the statistical cluster were three large letters: ACI.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding toward the laptop. My driver said nothing.

Dressed in his uniform of a tight thermal – this one was army green, with a peculiar extension that covered his neck – and loose-fitting cargo pants, together with those skin-tight leather gloves and the sleek helmet and mirrored visor, Xavier looked to me like the character from that Halo video game. I had never played it, but that super-soldier's look of cold efficiency in the face of insurmountably futuristic, evil odds fit Xavier Hibbert. Not an inch of skin was exposed; for all I knew, there was a remarkably lifelike machine underneath the thermal and cargos.

"Look," I said, "probably you already know this, but people are on to you. Police know. Everyone knows. WTOP did a story on your... incident... on Georgia tonight. They describe your truck and everything.

People are going to be on the lookout for you, or anyone who fits your description. The way fear spreads in this town” – I thought of the D.C. sniper and the soul-corroding terror of those weeks – “you’ll be hunted down in no time at all.”

“And?” His voice was even, machine-like.

“So I’ll cut the shit,” I said. “I don’t know what you’re doing with all this vigilante bullshit, whether you want to be a hero or some sort of reality star or you’re just a nut-job with a god complex. But I can extend your fifteen minutes. I’m a journalist and I want to write your story.”

“Your employer?” he asked as he turned left onto University Boulevard, a road I had never seen so deserted.

“No one, as of right now,” I said, thinking of Sophia’s babysitter and how I would scrounge cash to pay her. “I freelance for a bunch of people. Been doing it for a good while now and I know for a fact that there are a handful of editors in this town who would cut off a limb to have your story in their pages.”

I turned away from Xavier and toward the empty road, satisfied with my impromptu pitch.

The silence that followed rang in my ears. I imagined several deaths while we rolled down University: Xavier would tie me to a car bumper and crush my body in the teeth of his front bars; Xavier would reach across me, open my door, and shove me out; Xavier would pull over, drag me to his popped hood and press my face against the Tahoe’s steaming engine block until I was a deformed monster. Then he’d shoot me in the temple.

“Name’s Xavier,” he said. My lungs took in air for the first time in half a minute. “But you can’t use that in your story. Everything else is fair game. Just no name. That’s not negotiable.”

“Yes, of course,” I said without giving a second’s thought to my reputation with The Washington Citizen and its competitors.

“People need to know that there are consequences for egregious violations, not just of road rules dictated by law enforcement, but of basic human decency,” Xavier said, sounding like the self-appointed leader of the Polite Driver’s Uprising. “This area’s driving culture will be changed, by choice or by force. People’s behavior on our roads is corrosive and deadly.”

In that last word, that “deadly,” I heard the first quiver of emotion. In that infinitesimal break of Xavier’s monotone voice lied the fuel for his

mission.

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We weren't on the Beltway five minutes when a Mercedes sport car – an SLK – zoomed past Xavier's Tahoe right before the exit to New Hampshire Avenue. The Mercedes, blood red with black tint, had closed in on Xavier's truck before barely missing its bumper on the way past him and almost scraping the Tahoe's front bumper as it moved on by. There was a message in the way the hot rod made a semicircle around Xavier: You're moving too slow; you're in my lane, go fuck yourself.

For the first time, Xavier took his right hand off the wheel and swung the computer to face him. He looked through his helmet visor at the laptop screen, checking on the road every couple seconds. One by one, he punched in numbers. Then he hit enter.

"So what's going on... here," I asked, not understanding my driver's urgency.

"I'm checking the ACI."

"I saw that," I said. "What is it for? Why did you only start with the computer after the car passed?"

"Stands for Asshole Correlation Index," he said. "It's a precise mathematical measurement for who deserves retribution. I depend on these numbers to tell me who warrants it and who doesn't."

If I hadn't been so frightened by the Tahoe-driving super soldier, I would've laughed until I cried.

"So what... I don't know... factors do you take into account?" I asked.

"A lot," Xavier said. "Make and model, the car's year, the presence of a specialty license plate, proximity to a school, speed limit on the road in question, the tint on the window, any special car ornaments or bumper stickers. And then there's the violation."

"Does that guy make the cut?"

His mirrored eye-shield faced me and he said, "Don't do gender." I froze, unsure how to respond. "That driver could easily be a woman. Women are bigger assholes than people realize. Men don't have a monopoly on being terrible people."

“But no, that driver was just short of the requisite ACI number,” Xavier said, sounding resigned, but keeping the Mercedes within sight as we approached Interstate-95 North, a wider stretch that led to Baltimore, and eventually, New York.

“What’s the number?”

“Seventy-five out of a hundred,” Xavier said. “That SLK clocked in at seventy-two, seeing as how it’s a Mercedes which, along with BMWs and Hummers, have the highest asshole correlation. Who else besides an asshole would spend that kind of money on a car?”

Xavier had a point. I chuckled and I think he did too.

“Did you catch the plates?” he asked. I said no, I hadn’t. “YOLO.”

“What’s YOLO?”

“You only live once,” Xavier said. “That, along with the illegal lane change, got him into the seventies on the ACI chart. Rocket science this is not.”

“Pretty intuitive, actually,” I said. “YOLO.” I scoffed. “Only an asshole would...”

“Exactly.”

Xavier jammed on the accelerator and caught up with the red Mercedes SLK as it took the Route 212 ramp west toward Calverton. The car made a turn into a shopping center that would’ve sent a vehicle with looser suspension – like my dear old Sable – toppling over, roof over tires. Xavier followed and I thought I heard that small laugh again through his helmet. The Mercedes parked diagonally, somehow blocking parts of three spots in the lot outside a CVS. At half past midnight, there were four vehicles in said lot. And as we sat still, waiting for Xavier to make his internal calculations, I was hit square in the nostrils with that scent of... what was it? Rot?

“There it is,” Xavier said. He turned to the laptop and punched in a few more numbers, hit enter, and spun the laptop back around. “That’s it. Seventy-six. We have a live one. Here we go.”

He tugged on his double-duty seatbelt and said, “You might want to strap in.” I did, with great haste. There is no other way to describe what Xavier Hibbert did next but to say he gunned it; I watched the gas pedal touch the floor as his Tahoe rose up like a furious horse ready to make its run.

Xavier pulverized that little Mercedes sports car. That impact, so loud and violent, repaid the Mercedes driver for every bit of ACI his or her driving had generated. The back window and both side windows shattered in a cascade of splintered shards onto the black pavement. Both cars finally at rest, I saw Xavier lean back and breathe deeply, taking in the satisfaction of a wrong he had just righted.

He reached under his seat and grabbed a chunk of money, hopped out of his seat and walked to the driver's door.

"You violated the basics of roadway decorum," he said, repeating the routine he had given me following my roadway transgression. Xavier sounded like a police officer reading Miranda rights, listing the driver's violations.

"Get your neck fixed," Xavier said, tossing the money backhanded into the shattered window.

Xavier settled back into his Tahoe and drove away. "You were right," he said, "it was a man. Not that it makes any difference. An asshole is an asshole."

"Who could disagree?" I said. Another lengthy silence followed before I worked up the courage to ask about the money Xavier doled out so generously.

"I'm not going to tell you where it comes from," he said, regressing to the emotionless voice of the first few minutes of our late-night ride. "But I will tell you that the Neck Correction Fund is as important to what I do as the ACI readout. The computer only tells me who needs to be taught a lesson – it's an objective measurement, based on nothing but carefully considered statistics, not anger or fear. My decision making involves no decision making. It's cold. It's calculated. I consider it an algorithm for who needs to be taught a valuable lesson."

"And the fund?"

Xavier flashed a look of angry impatience – I could feel it through his visor, and sensed the shortness of this man's fuse.

"I was getting to that," he said, annunciating each word. "The Neck Correction Fund is meant to help people cope with the physical after-effects of being assholes on the road. They suffer – some suffer very much – in the weeks and months after their lesson is dispatched upon them, but I want to ensure that they can pay for any medical care or rehabilitation that might be required. The mission is to change people's behavior, not to debilitate them

for life. Pain is a powerful reminder of yesterday's sins, but I never intended for that pain to be with them always."

"Why call it the Neck Correction Fund?" I asked. "I'm sure you've hurt a lot of body parts with this whole side gig."

"Because an astounding percentage of assholes are holding their necks when I come to read them their violations," he said. "I can't take full credit though. It was... someone else's idea. A while back."

"Who?" I said. Xavier pretended the query never left my mouth.

Once again, that offensive stench wafted by and I winced. God, it was awful.

We were back on Interstate-95, headed south, when I told Xavier I needed to call my babysitter. I did, of course, because I was already an hour late, but before I dialed, I made sure the voice recorder application built into my phone was on.

And it was.

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Anyone could be an asshole during rush hour, Xavier explained, but it took a special kind of roadway monster to score a sky-high Asshole Correlation Index at one-thirty a.m., when deer outnumbered cars on the road.

In the middle of the night, Xavier said, the opportunities to be an asshole behind the wheel dropped by upwards of seventy percent. This, like every other number he cited that night, was the result of thorough research and statistical analysis.

In the hour after Xavier made minced metal out of the red Mercedes SLK that parked so rudely in a CVS parking lot, the helmeted crusader nabbed two more assholes. The first was a Ford F-250 pickup, its body raised on specialty tires, flying through a neighborhood in College Park, a couple miles north of the sprawling University of Maryland campus. The driver was using the narrow residential road as a shortcut between Route 1 and Paint Branch Parkway. People did it all the time, Xavier said.

Xavier whistled when he calculated the Ford's ACI, which came in at ninety-four, the third highest Xavier had ever seen. It wasn't just that the F-250 was more than doubling the twenty-five mile per hour speed limit through streets with cars parked on both sides. No, no. It was the driver's decoratively misogynistic flair that rocketed him near the top of the ACI

scale. On the right side of the truck's gate was a tattered bumper sticker of a middle finger pointed in the direction of anyone and everyone who cared to look.

And underneath the pickup's gate, swinging just below the Ford's license plate, were bumper nuts. That's right – enormous, vein-laced prosthetic testicles swinging back and forth while the truck became airborne over speed humps placed throughout the College Park neighborhood. Some drivers, apparently, thought it might be nice to give their vehicles genitals. Because, really, they needed reproductive organs as much as the next inanimate object.

“Can we assume that this asshole is a man?” I asked.

“Yes,” Xavier said, keeping a safe distance between him and the Ford. “I believe we can.”

The black Chevy Tahoe with teeth all around it made quick work of the truck with testicles. Here's all you need to know: The pickup ended up on its side in the middle lane of Paint Branch Parkway. The driver, who Xavier described as a fat redneck with tobacco juice running down his chin, was crying. I watched Xavier climb on top of the overturned truck and drop a wad of cash on the driver, who was left there, sobbing.

“If you're going to be an asshole, commit to it,” Xavier said on our way to the next scene of a crime. “That guy cried. I thought he might actually ask for his mother. These are not the actions of a died-in-the-wool asshole. He should've cursed at me. He should've threatened my life.”

“Is that why you stay fit?” I asked. “Just in case?”

“Precisely,” he said. “Just in case. I figured it couldn't hurt. You know, if anyone ever gave me a reason.” Xavier sighed. “I'd like to *have* a reason.” The Beltway Bandit – as he'd be known one day – wasn't kidding. He meant what he said – I could hear that, even through his helmet.

Spotting the next case was so easy, I found it sad. We had cruised south on Route 1, past the gigantic University of Maryland campus, past College Park City Hall, into a city called Hyattsville which, in recent years, had transformed itself into a hippy haven filled with artists who were no longer starving, but still dressed like it. Neither of us had said a word for five minutes and I thought of how tedious this stretch would be on my recording. Yes, the recording. I had violated Maryland state law by recording someone without their express permission. But here's the thing: I



had no notebook and no pen and my memory, frankly, is as reliable as my ancient Sable. If this were going to be a true-blooded freelance marvel, I would need quotes – strong quotes. After a while, I squashed my guilt by pretending I had told Xavier Hibbert that his every utterance was recorded on my phone. I had done the same thing with the make-believe fantasy football league members I had sketched from my overactive imagination. I knew all of it was lying and that it was wrong on a very basic level, but I also liked a good story, I wanted the approval of editors and I needed cash money.

Thoughts of my illegal recording were easy to shelve when we came upon what appeared to be an organized street race between two Honda Civics. Route 1 was void of any and all traffic at two in the morning and a crowd of a dozen or so gathered at the makeshift starting line. Both Civics were lowered to within an inch of the pavement. Their mufflers growled and poured exhaust as the drivers mercilessly revved their respective engines. Xavier turned off his Tahoe's lights and turned to his trusty algorithm.

“Speed limit's thirty-five, right?” he asked.

I spotted a nearby sign. “Yep.” Xavier punched in his calculations and tapped ‘enter’ key.

“Eighty-eight,” he said softly. “More than enough.” As he had done with the Mercedes in Calverton, Xavier acted without thinking. It seemed that way, anyway. He clearly had thought it out; his cognitive processes were just speedier than mine.

The Tahoe's lights flicked on and Xavier jammed on the gas. He zoomed toward the crowd of onlookers and they dispersed when he made it perfectly clear that this SUV wrapped in metal bars was ready and oh so willing to mow down bystanders. Xavier crossed the starting line and muttered, “C'mon.”

As if the drivers of the silly race car Civics had heard their judge and jury, they both zipped off the line and raced the hulking shining black beast with a two second head start. I tugged on my double-strap seatbelt and almost made the sign of the cross for the first time since grade school. There were no atheists in a bunker, or in the front seat of Xavier Hibbert's Tahoe. Probably someone somewhere knew that before I did.

The Civics were gaining on Xavier at an alarming rate. If he had made his move a half a second later, it wouldn't have worked out so

wonderfully. I may have not been here, relaying my story.

Racing along the right side of the Civics, Xavier yanked the steering wheel left and formed a caged barrier in front of the speeding Japanese compact cars. Neither of them so much as tapped their brakes. Their noses crunched into the bars on the left side of Xavier's truck and came to a rolling stop as we slid sideways in a way that would've sent many big, fat SUVs falling to their sides, like that pitiful Ford F-250 and its male genitalia.

Xavier, as usual, didn't miss a beat. He threw it in reverse until he was aligned with one of the Civics – a purple one with neon green doors – and demolished it with one clean hit, head on. The driver was slumped over the steering wheel. I don't like to think about how that guy is doing today, or how he's walking – if he's walking.

Xavier repeated the process with the second Honda, a pearl white car with a hideous pewter trim along its doors and hood. Smoke poured out of its hood when Xavier was done with it. Through the smokescreen, I saw the driver – a kid, no more than eighteen, push open his door and flop onto the road.

I had seen in Xavier Hibbert, several times that night, something that made me believe he was a steaming pile of fury and hatred underneath his robotic demeanor. Here's how I know I was right: Xavier put his Tahoe in park, got out, casually walked to the teenager crawling away from the scene of what amounted to a heinous car wreck and with one wide arching kick, knocked out the kid, cold. To kick an injured, helpless person – even one who had been drag racing – required a rare kind of emotional detachment. It takes a matured kind of anger to do what Xavier had done to that teenager. The boy's body went limp as soon as Xavier's boot made contact with his chin and scraped across his face. Xavier dispersed his cash prize on the unconscious kid's head and then threw a handful of bills into the other Civic. That driver was out too.

"Fuck you, man!" one of the spectators yelled from the other side of Route 1. The drag race onlookers were all running away like they had seen a tsunami coming ashore. But what they had seen was worse, so much worse, because tsunamis are impersonal in the death and destruction they impart. Xavier Hibbert was not.

Xavier lithely jumped into the Tahoe again and said, "You're witness to a lot of criminal activity tonight." The lightheartedness with which he

said that sent a bolt of ice-cold something from my head to the tips of my toes.

“Seems like it,” I said. I thought about saying nothing else, but couldn’t help myself. “Maybe went a touch overboard there with the second kid, eh?”

Xavier’s head turned toward me in a robotic motion. “What does it matter to you?” he said. “You’re objective. Or you’re supposed to be. Why would it matter to you in the least bit if I inflict a little extra punishment on people who make these roads so dangerous?”

“It doesn’t, but...”

“And besides,” he continued, living in the world in his helmet, pretending I had never spoken, “nothing I do here tonight with you matters, since you’re not going to use my name. Isn’t that right?”

My response was dictated by a deep, previously unacknowledged fear that answering wrongly might cause me great pain. “That’s right,” I said. “I don’t even know your name.”

A horrid facsimile of a smile crossed my face and I was sure Xavier, despite the mirrored shield separating our eyes, could see right through it. Nausea gripped me, either from fear of my driver, or from the wafting of a fresh dose of that sickening smell from somewhere unseen.

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One day I would have to confess to my daughter Sophia that I had created a child-friendly version of how her mother had died and what that meant for her.

Remember, I’m adept at creating stories which, as you’ve heard from writers greater than I, are just strings of outright lies pieced together for a reader’s pleasure. You’re wrong if you think stories are anything else. The best writers are epic liars – I’m sure I’m not the first to say this, but its repetition makes it no less true.

So I told sweet Sophia that her mommy was on her way to a friend’s birthday party, where there were balloons and cake and ice cream. I told Sophia that mommy had slaved away for hours in our kitchen making that cake before she left. Sophia nodded when I told her mommy’s car went bang into another car and that mommy floated straight from that car seat up to heaven, where she’s making more yummy cake for us. Sophia asked what

kind of cake and, knowing her favorite, I said chocolate cake with vanilla icing. She smiled at this.

I tell you this because in the final minutes of my night with Xavier Hibbert, I wished the roadway avenger – the Beltway Bandit -- had been a small child who would believe the Sophia-friendly story of how Suzy died. But Xavier, judging by his sculpted frame and effortless athleticism even in the simple act of walking, was not a cake eater. And Xavier had knowledge I could have never predicted.

Things had slowed after Xavier's demolition of the racing Honda Civics. He thought he had nabbed another perpetrator – victim? – back up north on Route 1, near an overgrown cemetery in Beltsville, an unincorporated area in the extreme north end of Prince George's County. We spotted a lady driving an old Subaru station wagon ease out of a gas station just as a Cadillac Deville was cruising past the station in the right lane. The Caddy had to swerve to its left to avoid a terrible collision. The Subaru driver hardly seemed to notice, inching along Route 1 at three o'clock in the morning.

The lady's Asshole Correlation Index fell short of Xavier's required score of seventy-five. He told me it was probably because she drove a Subaru, which Xavier described as "the official vehicle for the meek and timid."

"Blessed be the meek," he said in a mock preacher's voice. "Am I right?" I knew this question was not directed at me. I wouldn't know who he was talking to until a little later.

This added to the growing pile of fear in the pit of my stomach. Why? I don't know. But it did.

I was ready for the night to be over. After working up the courage to ask Xavier to drive me twenty-five miles, back to Derwood (I had no money for a cab, remember), he obliged. "Of course," he said. Relief washed over me.

On the way back to Derwood, I decided to ask questions I knew an editor would ask me later, if an editor even agreed to look at my profile of Xavier Hibbert, the Beltway Bandit.

"What's with the helmet?"

"Two purposes," he said. "To protect my identity, of course and for protection. I'm under no illusion that people will take my punishment sitting down."

“How long have you been at this?”

He was silent for a long time before saying, “Six months, give or take.”

“Are you from the D.C. area?”

“I’d rather not answer that.”

“Do you have family here?”

“I’d rather not answer that.”

I was aggravated, so I asked this with a voice that was perhaps too hard, too insistent: “Why do you do this? What happened?”

“I’d rather not...”

Silence. I was sure Xavier Hibbert was about to punish me, the way he did so many rude people on the road. My conversational ACI must have been off the charts.

But no, he was distracted. We were on 495 again, traveling west, when a flat-bed tow truck with an empty bed pulled off the highway’s right shoulder. Xavier slowed down and moved behind the truck. Listening to my recording of the night’s events, I can hear Xavier’s breathing pick up during the five minutes we trailed the tow truck off of the Beltway and into an industrial area off of the Montrose Road exit on Route 270 north.

Once again, Xavier’s headlights were flicked off and he left a considerable distance between his Tahoe and the tow truck we were following for no reason apparent to me.

“You going to see about this guy’s ACI?” I asked.

“No,” he said, his voice suddenly heavy. “No need.”

In my phone recording, which now resides in my laptop, on a computer in an editor’s office and in an open police file, you can hear Xavier crying with crystal clarity as we’re sitting outside a used car lot surrounded by a fence with barbed wire laid across its top. The half man-half machine wasn’t just sniffing. He was sobbing. This scared me with such wrenching force that I forgot to breathe.

“David,” Xavier said with a longing in that last syllable – a vocal act of reaching a hand out into the void.

“David?” I asked stupidly.

“Yes,” he said, shifting from sadness to unbridled fury in a beat. “David.”

I expected Xavier to turn to his laptop, his ACI Machine, his algorithmic moral code for how to proceed with the punishment he felt

obligated to dole out. He never glanced at the thing. This, as I'd soon find out, had nothing to do with the Asshole Correlation Index or the Neck Correction Fund.

The tow truck driver, a slim, bald man with a beer gut that fell over his belt buckle, had unlocked the gate to the car lot. He was hoisting himself back into his tow truck when the headlights to Xavier's Tahoe flashed on like the eyes of a beast waiting for its dinner in the brush and his tires screamed out and his engine wailed its rumbling warning.

Xavier Hibbert emitted a guttural scream in the last split second before the hit.

Phil Rice, the tow truck driver whose name the region would know during a flurry of exasperated local news coverage, was half in and half out of his truck when the speeding Tahoe landed its kill shot. This impact was tremendous – much worse than the others. Even with my state-of-the-art seatbelt fastened, my head jerked forward, then back. My insides felt like they pulled forward with the momentum of the crash and flung back into place when I slammed back into my seat.

I swear I heard the bone crack. You can't hear it in my recording, but I remember the sound: Something outside the Tahoe snapped with the pop of a thick tree branch breaking in two, clean in two.

That bone-crunch-tree-snap pop, it turned out, was Phil Rice's left leg.

When the steel teeth-bars of Xavier's Tahoe met the side of Rice's tow truck, the driver's leg was hanging out; he couldn't tuck it into the cabin before impact. I scurried out of the Tahoe when Xavier got out and Phil Rice's leg was no longer what we'd call a traditional leg. The lower part, below the knee, was hanging by bloody threads from his thigh. The bottom piece was turned in a very wrong direction. An ivory bone protruded from both parts.

I puked before I knew what happened.

The man was in shock, his eyes darting every which way, rolling back and finally locking on the Beltway Bandit as he glided toward the tow truck driver he had mangled. Phil Rice was mumbling. So was Xavier. You can hear it on my recording. I've listened to it fifty times and still have no idea what either man said to themselves.

Xavier stooped to one knee and put his helmeted face close to Rice's.

“Did you know Hubert Finkeldorf?” he asked like a cop in an interrogation room.

If I hadn’t just yacked, I would have at that moment. That name was so immediately familiar to me even though I hadn’t heard it in three years. Probably I hadn’t thought of the name Hubert Finkeldorf and how he sported an unkempt Ron Jeremy mustache and a ratty balding mullet for three years. Life was much easier when I thought of Sophia, my little girl, rather than the bloody death of her mother Suzy and the tow truck driver who killed her and a kid and landed another kid in the emergency room.

How in hell, I wondered, did Xavier Hibbert know the man who killed my child’s mother?

Phil Rice’s eyes rolled back in his head when Xavier barked the question again, asking whether he’d known Finkeldorf. Rice’s battered body was begging to shut down, either temporarily or just maybe for good. Xavier, in all his rage, didn’t allow it. He reached back and slapped Rice with his gloved hand. Next, he yanked on Rice’s collar so he was face to helmet shield.

The loose connections between Xavier Hibbert, Hubert Finkeldorf, Phil Rice, Suzy Johnston and me all snapped together at once. Two things happened simultaneously to make me understand with vivid horror what had happened, what was happening and what would happen: I looked away from Xavier when he smacked Rice once again and I saw on the caved-in driver’s side door of the tow truck two words that turned my legs to pillars of jelly. Hoffman Brothers, the door read. Hoffman Brothers, like Finkeldorf’s truck.

I hardly had two seconds to consider the implications of what this could mean for me, for Xavier and for Phil Rice, before Xavier ripped off his helmet and screamed, “This is what your friend did to me!”

He bawled and caught his breath. “Look at me!” Xavier thundered.

Xavier threw Rice to the ground and turned to me. Before anything else, I saw that Xavier Hibbert was black and this stunned me. Maybe that makes me a raging, backwoods white supremacist – I don’t know. My Anglo default setting had me assume the man was white. He most certainly was not. I also saw that there was a third reason Xavier wore his helmet everywhere all the time. It wasn’t just for protection and disguise; it was also for hiding grotesque deformities that had plundered his face. Standing there, underneath a street lamp outside the closed car lot, Xavier’s face was

a study in asymmetry. The left side had only a couple scars – one on his forehead and one extended from the corner of his mouth – but the right side was like nothing I had ever seen. It was caved in from his eyebrow to near his jaw line, with discolored skin covering most of the destroyed half. He had no right ear. He had no right eye. His lips on the right side were, as far as I could tell, not there.

I'm ashamed to say I was overcome with relief when Xavier snatched his helmet from the ground and stuffed it back on his head, over his face. The sight of that misshapen face was too much for me to handle for any longer. The grotesqueries were only a factor in my disgust. I couldn't look at this man's face for any longer because I knew who he was and that I had not visited him at Johns Hopkins after my girlfriend's boyfriend rammed a tow truck into his car in the middle of the night.

Xavier stomped away from Phil Rice – mercifully passed out on the pavement – and toward his Tahoe. I winced when he passed me; I was convinced he knew who I was and my connection to the car crash that ruined him. In the rolling reel of my runaway imagination, I saw Xavier snapping my legs and leaving me to die like Phil Rice the tow truck driver.

But there was nothing and I exhaled. Xavier opened the back of his Tahoe and, still panting and hollering between sobs, said, "You want my story? Here's my story."

With a click and a pull, the Tahoe's back gate flew open and out of that space came a stench so powerful that I wobbled like a boxer fresh off a left hook to the temple. Spaghetti legs, I think it's called.

The carpeted Tahoe floor was empty except for a mangy children's blanket smudged with dirt and mud on two corners. Underneath the blanket – adorned with fat, pink pigs and a whole line-up of chubby farm animals – were unmoving lumps.

More interconnected wires crossed in my memory and suddenly I saw Suzy's pretty face and that bastard Finkeldorf and his Hoffman Brothers tow truck and, yes, of course – the face of the kid who died in the car wreck and his brother who lived.

Xavier ripped off the blanket and revealed the decayed remains of his little brother, dead at thirteen, almost three years earlier. The child was mostly a skeleton, lying peacefully on his back of bones in his brother's SUV. David Hibbert's remains stared sightlessly at the ceiling above him.



Xavier removed his helmet and draped himself over the deteriorated remains of a brother he loved so deeply that he exhumed his body and drove him around the D.C. metro area all night every night.

“David, David, David,” Xavier said again and again, more times than I could count. “I love you.”

Finally pried away from the corpse, Xavier turned to me with his malformed face, destroyed in the accident that took his brother. I had never seen so many rivulets of tears on one face.

“This is why I do what I do,” he said. “It’s something we used to talk about, me and David. We would talk about who we’d like to hit – to just smash the fuck out of – while we drove around. I drove him everywhere. My dad pulled me aside one day and told me I was in charge of David’s transportation, whatever that means. My brother was a busy kid – sports, after-school stuff, even girls-” – Xavier let out a sorrowful laugh – “so we were in the car all the time. We had a lot of time to talk. And that came up so often that we made a game out of it.”

I listened and nodded and hoped my recorder was still rolling.

“I asked him one day, ‘What would you do if you won the lottery?’ And without hesitation, David says, ‘I’d use it the way Jack Nicholson does in *The Departed*, in that scene with DiCaprio’s hand.’”

Xavier raised his eyebrows, asking me if I was familiar with the scene. I was. In the gangster flick, Nicholson bashes DiCaprio’s broken hand with his boot, over and over until DiCaprio is sweating and shaking and barely able to speak. Nicholson, in all his sociopathic behavior, tosses a few hundred dollars at DiCaprio and tells him to go get his hand fixed. Gangster empathy at its finest.

“But instead of the hand,” Xavier said, “David wanted to say, ‘Go get your neck fixed.’ We both thought that would be so satisfying, to just nail one of these awful people and humiliate them with cash thrown in their faces. Fuck those people, right, David?”

Xavier turned toward the remains of his brother when he asked this and looked to be waiting for a reply. There was none, of course, but when Xavier turned to me, he smiled as if satisfied with what David had had to say.

“After a few weeks, we came up with the Neck Correction Fund,” he said. “That’s what we’d call it when we hit the lottery, because people on

TV were always grabbing their necks after car accidents, with the whiplash and whatnot.” Xavier turned toward David again.

“We didn’t hit the lottery,” he said, as if I had assumed they did. I could see the Beltway Bandit was losing his grip on the things that were going on outside his manic head. “But my parents have a little money, so they took out life insurance for them and us. Cashing in David’s policy was the worst thing they ever dreamt of doing, but they went through with it and it turned out to be a whole lot of money.”

“How much?” I asked, again because I knew an editor would demand to know.

A look of indignation passed between us. “I’d rather not answer that,” he said.

I knew the answer to my next question, but I asked because failing to do so would surely raise my driver’s suspicions. “How’d you lose him, your brother?”

“Tow truck,” Xavier said, pointing at the half-destroyed truck with a wisp of smoke wafting from under its bent hood. “Just... bam, T-boned us at the intersection of Norbeck and Layhill. Never saw it, never heard it. Hit us on the passenger side” – Xavier chomped on his lip to stall the oncoming tears – “and I was out cold. David... he was gone right away. A fire flared up in the undercarriage.”

Xavier opened his hand and made a circular motion around his face, showing me the fine work of that car fire.

“That guy over there,” he said, nodding toward Phil Rice and his leg that wasn’t really a leg anymore, “worked for the tow truck company that hit us. His bastard friend... he took my brother. Sometimes punishment needs to be passed on in untraditional ways. Indirect ways.”

My legs trembled; it took constant effort to stay upright. Now, writing this, I know I fought to stay standing because I was insanely afraid of what would happen if I hit the deck and left myself vulnerable.

After glancing both ways down Montrose Road, I thought it best to walk or hitchhike back home, about eight miles from the car lot. I was leaving the scene of a heinous crime, I knew, but there was no amount of hard cash from the Neck Correction Fund that could entice me to stay there with Xavier Hibbert.

I wish I had stuck with my convictions.

Xavier wiped the tears from his face and, in a suddenly serene and monotone voice, he said, “Get in and let me take you home.”

Xavier did not blink, did not flinch. He slid his motorcycle helmet back over his ravaged face and motioned me toward his Tahoe, which had sustained quite a bit of damage from the collision with Phil Rice’s tow truck. There was no choice. I followed my driver to his truck and vaulted myself into the passenger seat.

Xavier started the car – the engine clicked at first, surely a result of the latest crash – and just sat there, staring out into the carnage he had created.

“You know where to go?” I asked. Xavier shushed me and sat there like a mannequin. It wasn’t clear then, but now I know he was listening for directions. Probably he had listened for his brother’s orders the whole night and I didn’t make the connection until I got a glimpse of Xavier’s macabre cargo.

Xavier nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

He hopped out of the Tahoe, strode toward unconscious Phil Rice, rummaged through the tow truck’s cabin and emerged with a crowbar. Xavier didn’t use that crowbar as a blunt instrument, as I – and surely you – expected him to. I wish he had. Instead, he turned that crowbar upside down and stabbed Phil Rice in the chest, so deep that the black piece of shaped metal stayed upright when Xavier released it.

“Say hello to Hubert!” Xavier bellowed. At no point during the night had I wanted to flee so much and at no point in my life had I been more terrified of a human being.

“Sorry you had to see that,” Xavier said as we merged onto Montrose Road, finally headed home. “But I have to follow orders.”

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Amid a chorus of weeping and scream-sobs at Suzy’s funeral, I could not summon a tear. It was perhaps the only time when the absence of raw emotion in a public setting was uncomfortable. I felt people staring me down, wishing I would cry, just a little bit, like Sophia had done. It seemed so wrong for my eyes to be so dry.

I tried hard that day, trying any way to press my sleepy tear ducts into action. I pictured Suzy’s pretty face, her strong nose and soft green eyes and

her charming half smile when she tried not to laugh at my jokes. I closed my eyes and forced myself to consider the unthinkable permanence of the situation. But there my eyes remained, dry and lively. When I said I never really loved Suzy, I meant it. There was no epiphany when her body was being lowered into the dirt. Maybe that puts me firmly in the ranks of history's greatest monsters. Probably it does.

I could've never known my tears had stayed put, waiting patiently for the car ride home with Xavier Hibbert.

The moisture welled up slowly until there was no more room left and tears spilt down my nose. It could've been for any number of reasons: The heartbreaking horror of a big brother having lost his little brother, the knowledge that my Sophia would grow up without ever really knowing her mother, the trauma of having just seen an innocent man brutally extinguished by an unfeeling psycho, some unacknowledged longing for Suzy's touch, or, maybe – just maybe – the purest and simplest fear I had ever known.

With the tears came a loosening in my nostrils and before I knew it, I sniffed. Xavier glanced at me. The Beltway Bandit said nothing. I wish I had followed suit.

It emerged from my lips as a gargled whisper: "Suzy."

Xavier took on the robotic quality of the first hour we spent together, turning his helmet-head as if on a hinge. He looked at me and away from the road, for so long that I thought he had forgotten he was behind the wheel.

"What did you say?"

I used my sleeve as a tissue and wiped my face full of tears and snot. In those three seconds, I considered a hundred and eighty-seven ways to lie about the word I had just uttered and silently declared none of them worthy of saying aloud.

"Repeat the word," Xavier said. "Repeat it now."

I did as Xavier said if only so he'd look back at the road for the first time in what seemed like minutes after training his invisible stare on me. "Suzy," I said.

Xavier finally resumed watching the road. My ridiculous hope was that this discussion of Sophia's deceased mother had ended. How silly. How incredibly silly.

“Suzanne Hines,” Xavier said, with no hint of a question. I hadn’t heard or thought Suzy’s full name in so long, I almost denied it and told Xavier no, he had the wrong person.

“There was no way I could...”

“Be quiet,” Xavier said. “I’m trying to listen.”

Silence again, as there had been so many times in my three and a half hours with the Beltway Bandit. I sat still and tried to control my breathing as Xavier spoke to the rotted corpse of his little brother, staring ten thousand miles away, through the Tahoe’s roof.

“OK,” Xavier said. He tugged hard on his double seatbelt and leaned back so his helmet pressed against his headrest.

The acceleration that followed pinned me to the seat and sent me into a panic I had never know; it felt, as I vaguely remember, like I was leaving my body in some vain attempt to preserve my sanity. Xavier was racing down a narrow part of Layhill Road, bracketed by thick clumps of trees leading to a wider part of the rural road that I knew led to a bridge. Our location was secondary to everything else because when I glanced at the Tahoe’s speedometer, I saw we were going a hundred and ten miles per hour.

We arrived at the entrance of the short cement bridge faster than I could comprehend. Then came a range of sensations and sights my brain could hardly register: Barreling through a short cement wall, flying, dropping, watching the black water beneath get closer and more detailed, the brutal impact upon entry into the water, being upside down at the bottom of the body of water, watching the Tahoe’s cabin fill up with a rush of water from all sides, the shocking cold of said water and Xavier’s calm in the face of it all. He sat there, strapped in to his seat, not moving. Probably he was knocked out. I can’t say why, but I’ll never believe that. The water had just covered my mouth and nose when I began my wrestling match with the massive seatbelt buckle, a piece of metal that had at some point during our plunge become mangled and pinched. I pulled, pushed, jiggled, punched – nothing worked. I hadn’t had the foresight to take a gulp of air before the water poured over me, so my chest felt like something had exploded in its center. It burned so much, and all I wanted to do was open my mouth and take in air I knew was not there.

I resisted long enough to break the seatbelt buckle and pushed open my door. Something bumped my leg while I swam out of the Tahoe that

might have been my four-door coffin and when I turned to face what I knew would be Xavier Hibbert, I instead was face to face with his brother. David's face, half skeleton and half rotted skin, floated past me in all its gory glory. Its teeth were frozen in a permanent smile. At the bottom of that black water, it asked me if I thought people deserved retribution, on the road or otherwise and I said yes, David, yes they do.

My legs pumped as if by themselves and I was at the water's surface, filling my empty lungs with air in the greatest moment of my life. I was alive. Yes, I had Xavier Hibbert's story and that was well and good. But I was alive. Wading in that icy water, I was unreasonably sure that everything would be fine, even though it wouldn't, because it never is.

Again, I was alive and that's all that mattered. Alive, then and now, is everything.

Alive. Alive.

I lied, as you surely have guessed by now.

That's the one thing I'm honest about: My proclivity to lie and lie and lie some more. I used Xavier Hibbert's name in my epic profile of the Beltway Bandit because I knew no magazine would accept it otherwise. There was no point in trying to keep my promise to Xavier and withhold his name – that's how I justified it, anyway.

I took my waterlogged phone to the computer people at a big box store in Rockville and asked if they could save anything on my phone, specifically a four-hour audio file. They told me no, so I pulled aside one of the greasy haired geeks wearing too-tight khakis and told him I'd give him five hundred bucks if he could retrieve the recording. He found all but a few minutes of the file and asked for his cash. I told him I'd have to sell a story first. He didn't like that too much.

I wrote with a fury through the following night, rewinding and fast forwarding my recording, making absolute sure I quoted Xavier word for word because any respectable editor would demand a copy of the audio and force an underpaid assistant to triple check every quoted passage.

I finished the story just before the clock hit five a.m. and emailed the finished product to four magazines. By noon that day I had one response: The Washington Citizen, the publication I had burned and burned badly with the fictional account of an eccentric fantasy football league straight from the annals of my imagination, promised to take a look.

I never heard back from those other three magazines. Suckers.

The cops came knocking two days after Xavier's death plunge and I told them everything I knew, even burning a copy of the audio from that night. I didn't have to, but I was determined to cooperate. You'll be shocked to know that I lied to the police and told them Xavier had kidnapped me when I stopped on Arcola Avenue to help a motorist under siege by a black Tahoe.

My story of the Beltway Bandit and the excavated corpse who gave his every order was, as you may have guessed, a big deal. The Washington Citizen sold more copies of that issue than their last dozen combined. I was interviewed on three news stations. Someone out west is making a TV movie about the Beltway Bandit, starring a young man much better looking than me. I heard someone wants to make a feature length film.

I thought I had hit the journalist jackpot when the Citizen mailed me my check for five thousand eight hundred dollars. It's all relative now: A ritzy Manhattan type wreaking of power and prestige tracked me down last week and asked me to write a book. The term "six figures" was thrown around loosely during that forty-minute conversation, which ended with an emphatic yes over martinis.

Probably you're wondering why I'm writing this account, one with all the warts and scars I've trimmed from my public telling of this wild tale. I'll begin my explanation with an exchange I had with one of the three cops who came to my apartment in the aftermath of Xavier's rampage.

"Did you find his parents?" I asked.

"We did," said one of the officers, a short Hispanic woman named Uribe. "They have no idea where he is." I sat down and tried not to hyperventilate.

"You didn't find both?" I said.

"Both?" Uribe said, puzzled and seemingly annoyed.

"Xavier and David," I said. "Both."

"Neither," Uribe said. "We swept everything within a mile. Nobody there."

Uribe, bookended by two particularly burly officers, told me that the official police account would include the recovery of the suspect's body.

"Contradiction on this matter will make life very difficult for you," she said, deadly serious. "Go on TV, write your books, do whatever you want here. But you will abide by our account."

So I did – I followed Uribe’s orders because I enjoyed life without the difficulties she promised. Two years and two months have passed since the night that changed mine and Sophia’s lives and, until nine days ago, I thought we’d go on forever this way.

The headlines say differently though.

It started in Providence, Rhode Island. A black Chevy Suburban wrapped with rows of steel bars demolished a Hummer H3 on a back road at one in the morning. There was a man wearing a helmet, there was cash thrown in the face and there was mention of neck correcting. I, like most breathless voices on TV, wrote it off as a copycat. But two days later, it happened in New Haven, Connecticut – a Ford Focus flipped by a Suburban after running a red light and injuring a pedestrian. Panic tightened its grip on me with every new headline: In Newark, four days ago, in Trenton a day after, in Atlantic City two days ago and yesterday in Dover, Delaware.

I now know what the pack of drag-racing fans in Hyattsville felt as the Beltway Bandit brutalized their friends. Xavier Hibbert was, in fact, a force of nature, as unfailing and unstoppable as any weather pattern making its slow march toward people who would become its victims. His directions from beyond his little brother’s gravestone are still coming and I’m horrified that those commands include my name.

I feel that force sweeping north to south, coming for me, the man who got filthy rich and stupidly famous by breaking a solemn journalistic promise to keep Xavier anonymous. The fear in my belly is growing and mutating and making me a sleepless wreck of a human being. I’m short tempered with Sophia these days. I can’t eat anything. I spend ten hours a day online, searching for any new traces of Xavier’s trek back home.

The Washington Citizen’s editors haven’t seen a word of what I’ve written here. Still, they’ve agreed to print it in its entirety if – when, really – Xavier comes for me. I fear Xavier like my personal grim reaper, but I’ll never admonish the man for what he does, for the vengeance he seeks.

Our world is brimming with assholes who make our collective lives worse every day and if Xavier Hibbert can help them see the error of their ways, then good for him. Brute force, just maybe, is the answer to everything.

Xavier has a system, a moral code and a mission. That’s more than most people can say about their pitiful existences. It’s more than I can say, for sure. My moral code is to have no moral code.



And that, in the end, is why I have to die. That's why Xavier Hibbert is going to kill me.

## **Where We Live – In Darkness**

*Neil Leckman*

We live down here at the bottom of the well  
The place you throw things, no one will tell  
The dead things linger, fester and stew  
Waiting for the day they get back to you  
Earthquake came buried the well underground  
Flood came tore it apart with a thunderous sound  
Bones lay gleaming out in the open air  
Nobody noticed them all laying there  
They rose up and walked in darkness no more  
They had only one thought, even the score  
So when you hear a quiet approach late at night  
Turn tail and run with all your might...

## **Creatures of the Night**

*Chad Case*

Chastity tossed the fish in the frying pan. It sizzled with heavenly delight. The sound brought the creatures to the boarded-up kitchen window. As they began scratching at it, Chastity turned her head towards it and sneered. She wasn't worried about them getting in, she knew the floodlights would kick on any minute and send the creatures scrambling back into the darkness.

She flipped the fish, seasoned it heavily and then poked at it mechanically. Bud entered the kitchen, drawn by the aroma. Carefully he walked over to her and kissed her cheek. She started crying. He thought about apologizing for what would have been the thousandth time but didn't. Apologies weren't going to help. They couldn't bring their daughter back. She blamed Bud for keeping her out so close to sundown. He knew better. He knew how dangerous those monsters were.

The floodlights kicked on, sending the things running and catcalling at the night air. Bud grinned but lowered it quickly, realizing that his daughter was now one of those creatures. He took a seat at the table, grabbed an old, very outdated magazine and thumbed through it. His stomach growled in anticipation of the day's catch, a measly one pound bass. Chastity covered the thing with seasoning and continued flipping it.

Once it was done, she took two plates from the cabinets and cut the fish in half. Languidly, she brought them to the table and took the seat beside Bud. He dug in, but didn't think much of it. He thought she had put too much seasoning on it but he knew not to say anything. She was still upset. He nudged her plate towards her, but she pushed it back. She nodded that he could have it.

Watching with somber eyes as he finished the plate, Chastity leaned back in her chair and waited for the poison to do its work. After a few minutes, it did. Bud fell from his chair and his head bounced off the linoleum, hard. With his last breath, he apologized again but Chastity didn't care. She rose to her wobbly feet and went to the front door. She pulled the boards away and opened it. The shrieks from the creatures pierced her ears but Chastity wasn't scared. She yearned to be with her daughter. Even as she wondered what horrors awaited her in the darkness; Chastity walked into it and joined the creatures of the night.



## **Someone's Been Sleeping In My Bed**

*Kevin L. Jones*

The street was dark, no more than that, pitch black. There was no light anywhere as he turned his car onto his street. The only illumination in evidence was his headlights shining weakly on the blacktop before his moving vehicle. As he peered out of his window he tried to tell himself that his neighborhood was experiencing a power outage but something about that didn't ring true. He exited his vehicle and stood in his driveway. Finally he realized what it was that disturbed him so about the surrounding darkness. No candles flickered in his neighbor's homes. He could see no cell phone lights or the glow of flashlight beams anywhere but, most troubling of all, was the quiet. Aside from his ragged breathing there was nothing, absolutely nothing. Not one sound reverberated anywhere. During the last blackout every dog in the neighborhood had barked all through it. Now it seemed as if every dog, along with their masters, had vanished from the face to the earth. It was as if he was all alone in a world that had been enveloped by darkness.

Finally he could stand the black silent empty street no longer. He had to get indoors. With trembling hands he unlocked his front door and quickly sealed it behind him. As he leaned against his entrance the red digits of his clock shined in his darkened living room. He reached over and flipped on the light switch. The room was bathed with soft warm light. He smiled gratefully. It had just been a power outage after all. He stepped out onto his porch to see if his neighbors' power had been restored to them but everything outside was the same, black and still.

Then he noticed something that was truly odd, although his curtains were wide open no light shone out onto his lawn. Quickly he re-entered his house and tried to figure out what was happening to him. It seemed as if his sanity was slowly eroding. Suddenly he felt completely exhausted. It hurt to think. All he wanted to do was lay down, to sleep. He went into his bedroom but halted at the foot of his bed. A line from a children's story that his mother had read to him quite frequently began to repeat in his mind from Goldilocks and the Three Bears, "Someone's been sleeping in my bed."

Indeed someone was sleeping in his bed. Even with the lights off he could clearly see their outline beneath the sheets on the mattress before him. As quietly as he could manage he crept over to his closet and retrieved a baseball bat. He then flipped on a nearby lamp. In the newly illuminated room the figure in the bed did not stir. He held his bludgeon menacingly aloft and yelled, "Hey buddy, just what in the hell do you think you're doing in my house?"

Still the intruder did not move. His hand trembled terribly as he reached down and threw back the bedcovers. What was revealed to him shocked him to his core. His mind almost could not comprehend what he was witnessing. His exact doppelganger lay in the bed clad only in a pair of pajama bottoms. Its eyes were wide open staring at nothing. It was quite dead. A low moan escaped from his lips as the bat slipped from his grip and landed on the carpet with a soft thud. At first he began to walk slowly backwards then he turned and fled from his home as fast as his legs would carry him. He jumped into his car and sped down the dark empty streets not knowing where he was going. He just knew that he had to put as much distance between himself and the body that lay in his bed as possible.

All the while he mumbled to himself, "I'm not dead. I'm not dead," but each time he repeated this phrase he became less and less convinced of the truthfulness of his words. He drove and drove but no matter how miles he traveled or in which direction he went he would always wind up back in front of the house where his body lie cold and dead. He would spend an eternity in this dark limbo until he faced his own death but some things are too terrible to ever be truly dealt with. He ran and would keep running; he is running still.

## **Don't Leave Home Without Them**

*David Frazier*

My wife and I have pizza at a local parlor every Friday evening. We left home at the usual time on the night before Halloween.

The power went out in our neighborhood while we were gone. We enjoyed our evening, unaware of the outage.

I don't carry any keys other than my car keys. I always enter and leave my house via the attached garage. It has an electric door opener which can be operated from outside using a keypad, but of course it won't open if there is no power.

We drove home after dinner and noticed the traffic lights were out. As we got nearer to our home we saw the street lights were out too. Sure enough, when I turned the corner leading into our subdivision, it was as dark as a well digger's ass at midnight.

I was counting on my wife to have her keys with her. "You've got your house keys, right?"

"Hell no!" she said. "I left them on the kitchen counter."

"That's a good place for 'em! You know I never carry any house keys!"

"What are we going to do now!" she said, panicking. "What about the dog?"

"Relax," I said. "We'll go to Starbucks and have a cup of coffee and use their facilities. Maybe by then they'll repair the problem and the juice'll be back on."

We drove out of the subdivision again, I thought, as we drank coffee, I could call home and see if the answering machine would pick-up. Then I would know the power was on.

We drank our coffee slowly and used the restroom twice. I must have called home four times from my cell phone during the hour we spent there. The power was still out and so were we. We had to leave because they closed Starbucks for the night.

I drove home very slowly, all the way hoping that power had been restored.

When I turned the corner, I saw it was still dark. I pulled into our driveway and shut the engine off. We were plotting our next move, since we

were still locked out of our own home. Plan “B” was to go to a hotel after eleven pm., if power hadn’t been restored.

“Damn NIPSCO!!” I grumbled. “Every time somebody sneezes around here, we lose power. I should pay my bill like I have power; once-in-a-while! May as well catch some z’s.” I told my wife.

I got comfortable, slipping down into the comfy car seat for a nap.

The next thing I knew, two men came out of the darkness, flung the doors of the truck open and pulled both of us out of the truck onto the lawn. They were wearing black ski masks, dark clothes and black gloves. They looked like ninja warriors, right out of a Jackie Chan movie.

They took a couple rolls of duct-tape from a duffel bag and bound our hands and feet with it. Then they gagged us by stuffing white cotton rags into our mouths. They kicked me in the ribs until I passed out from the pain. I could hear my wife’s muffled screams as they viciously ripped off her clothing and slapped her face. I went out of my mind.

I was unconscious about an hour, then I woke up and saw my wife. Her clothes were shredded. Her breasts were out of her bra. Her nose was reddened and bloody, her lips swollen and bleeding. Her panty hose and panties were pulled down below her knees. They were torn to ribbons, like they had used a box cutter on them. She laid there, sobbing softly.

“Wait a minute.” I thought. “How can I see all of that detail in the dark?”

The next thing I knew, my wife was shaking my arm and saying, “Wake up, Dave, the lights are back on! Let’s get into the house!”

“Are you alright?” I asked in a panic-stricken voice.

“I’m okay, I’m okay!” she replied in a comforting manner. “Why do you ask?”

“Ugh, jeez, never mind!”

I realized that I had fallen asleep for about twenty minutes. The whole incident was a dream. I’ll never leave home without my entry door keys again...



## **Vision From A Dream**

*Ken L. Jones*

She comes to me perfect and beautiful  
After haunting the dreams of her nubile young friends  
Capuchin monkey bloodsuckers stitch her up  
While one of them plays a weird off key violin  
That likes to snack on human flesh  
Until she winds up looking pretty dead  
And then she licks the veins upon my face  
For she was born in blood spilled  
This innocent transformed become a maniac  
Arisen like a sacrificed dog  
And who now leaves behind no witnesses  
In the glowing dark to speak ill of all that  
She is capable of in a public park.

## Umbilical

*Robina Williams*

Eve went down to breakfast, as usual. To her surprise and annoyance, neither of her children greeted her, nor so much as looked at her. She might as well not have been there.

“Hello?”

Susie and Joe carried on chatting to each other.

“Aren't you going to say good morning to me?” she asked them.

Evidently they were not.

“I'm not invisible,” she said tartly and waved a hand. *Oh!* She frowned and waved her other hand in an expansive gesture but still saw nothing. Worried now, she passed both hands in front of her face, then gave a little scream and hurried back upstairs.

She stared with dismay at the sight of the body lying in her bed, a body with tousled gray hair, wearing a white cotton nightgown that looked much like her own. *Oh dear.*

She stood trying to collect her thoughts, then moved across—glided, she had to admit—to her little red armchair by the window, sank into it, noting with surprise that she did not pass through the fabric or frame of the chair, and tried to work things out. She was dead, right? She glanced at the body lying in her bed. Yep, that was her. But so was this: she tightened her grip on the armrest of the chair, and felt the pressure on her finger joints. Curling her knuckles into a fist, she squeezed—and grimaced as her fingernails dug into her palm.

Eve was baffled. She was undoubtedly dead, but could still sit on a chair, feel pain, move around in her own home. She seemed to be in some weird mid-way state. She had expected that at death she would pass over, to someplace else, but though she had left her body, she was still close to it. She hoped she wouldn't stay with it; she wanted to die properly, move on to... wherever. Wondering if any dregs of life remained in it, she rose, glided across the room and gave her body a sharp slap on the face. The stinging blow brought no physiological change to the pallid features, no color to the cheeks.

She was still standing by the bed, trying to puzzle things out, when she caught Susie's voice: “I'll go and wake Mom before we go.”

“Don’t,” Joe said. “Leave her to have a lie-in this morning. She’s not going to work today.”

“OK,” Susie said, “I’ll text her later.”

Helplessly Eve glanced at her cell phone, resting on the bedside table. As she heard the front door open, she screamed, “Come back!”

But Joe and Susie did not come back; they closed the door behind them and a few moments later Eve heard car doors bang shut, an engine ignite and a vehicle accelerate away down the road. She burst into tears.

After a few minutes’ sobbing, she remembered having earlier gone down to the dining room and wondered if she might be able to leave the house herself. She crossed to the window, placed her palm on the pane and pushed to see if, less substantial now, she might be able to pass through it, but the glass formed a solid barrier. Eve could not leave her home. Ever? Not even when her body was taken away? Would she stay behind as some sort of ghost?

Perhaps it was not the house but her corpse that bound her there. She shuddered at the thought, visualizing with horror a putrefying carcass with insects crawling over it, into it, out of it. Surely she wasn’t doomed to be shut up, sentient, aware, *thinking*, with her rotting remains in a decaying wooden casket in a damp, dark grave. She gazed longingly through the window at the blue sky; she should be free, roaming the heavens, flying with the rain clouds, skimming the seas with the gulls and petrels, soaring on thermals with eagles and hawks—though she would have settled for oblivion.

Convinced that something had gone wrong with her passing, she sank back into her armchair and had another cry.

Late in the afternoon, she watched as Susie, back from work, entered her bedroom and ran over to the bed. Her scream brought Joe rushing up the stairs. Now it was her children who were in floods of tears. Joe’s phone call brought the doctor; the doctor’s call brought an ambulance with paramedics, stretcher and body bag, into which Eve was zipped along with her cadaver. As the bag was opened, she had shrunk back into her chair but found herself suddenly hauled across the room; next thing she was in the bag with her body.

In the mortuary and out of the bag, she stood quietly observing her autopsy, and reckoned she coped well with the stress of the occasion, though she felt decidedly queasy on seeing her body sliced into and organs

lifted out. The procedures caused her no pain but the sight of blood and guts that were formerly hers unsettled her.

The funeral passed off satisfactorily, as far as she could tell from within the casket. She enjoyed listening to the hymns and the organ music, which reached her clearly; to her disappointment the spoken parts of the service came through to her only as an indistinct drone of male voice; she would have liked to hear a glowingly eulogistic address. She wondered how many of her friends and relatives had attended and hoped there was a good turn-out; she reckoned there probably was, from the sound of it.

As the organ voluntary signaled the end of the service, she felt the wheeled bier move once more and the casket was borne out of the church for a bumpy progress across the adjoining graveyard. This, Eve thought wretchedly, was her final journey in the upper world.

The casket was lifted from the bier and lowered into the grave in a jerky descent that caused her cadaver to slide about. She heard prayers, the scattering of soil tossed in handfuls onto the casket lid, more prayers, sobbing, cries of “Goodbye, Mom,” then... nothing, until, sometime later, a loud thud startled her. Many more thuds followed and she knew that the casket was being covered with earth: she was being buried—if not alive, then not wholly dead.

“Let me out!” she shouted. But soil continued to fall onto her pine box.

*What now?* she asked herself despairingly when the burial was, plainly, over. *I shouldn't be here. I should be... somewhere else. Unless all the graves are full of people stuck in their caskets with their stinking cadavers. Their disgusting, rotting, slimy corpses. Sooner I'm a skeleton, the better.* “Come on, insects!” she yelled. “Beetles, worms, grubs, come and eat me up! Decompose me. Turn me into bones. It’s horrible in here. Hurry, oh god, hurry!”

*God... divine help... it has to be worth a try.* Eve concentrated her thoughts, brought to the forefront of her mind phrases she had not recited for many a year, and prayed to the Lord in heaven to deliver her; after more thought she addressed a prayer to the goddesses of the underworld, Hecate and Queen Persephone; and finally she humbly besought assistance from any deity who might happen to be listening. *Any god, please!* Then she cried again.

She stopped abruptly on hearing scratchy sounds within the casket, and shrieked with fear. In the darkness, she could see nothing. Nervously she slowly stretched out a hand, and touched a smooth shell. A beetle, from the feel of it: a huge one. As it hissed, she recoiled with a shudder... but wasn't this what she had wanted? She had called for insects to devour her corpse, to strip the rotting flesh from the bone. Had this creature answered the call? Had a god sent it? Suddenly she felt an intense pain in her stomach, as if she had been stabbed, and screamed as something was torn from her. *My god, I'm being disemboweled.*

Then mandibles snapped together and her agony ceased. "Thank god," she muttered.

The beetle buzzed. "What are you?" she asked.

A moment later she found herself out of the grave and in the open air. Standing before her, with a rising sun behind him, was a tall, loincloth-clad figure with glistening golden skin; as her eyes adjusted to the light and she looked up at the man she saw with horror that his human trunk was crowned with the head of a beetle. She gasped. "Who are you?"

"I AM KHEPRI."

"Are you... the god of beetles?"

The antennae-ed head nodded. "AND, ON OCCASION, OF LAST RESORT."

"What do you mean?"

Khepri raised an arm and held aloft a slender silver cord.

"Is that what you took out of me?" Eve asked.

"YOU COULD NOT MOVE ON WHILE THIS WAS ATTACHED."

"What is it? Some sort of umbilical cord?"

"THE DEATH CORD HAS TO BE SEVERED JUST AS THE BIRTH CORD HAS TO BE SEVERED. IT USUALLY BREAKS AT THE POINT OF DEATH."

"But mine didn't," Eve said. "You freed me. Thank you."

Khepri graciously inclined his head.

Eve was gazing in wonderment at the dangling silver cord when the rising sun behind Khepri brightened into a high noon dazzle and, blinded by the brilliance, she turned aside. When the light dimmed and she looked again to where Khepri had been standing, all she saw was a richly glowing red disk sinking toward the horizon.

"Thank you," Eve said to the setting sun. "Thank you, Lord Khepri."

*What, she wondered, happens now?*

## **The Hidden**

*Neil Leckman*

I have witnessed horrid things. The police can't find the perpetrator, but I know who it was and I can't tell anyone. I'm been held prisoner in my own home, without the possibility of parole. Watching the atrocities is the worst part of it. The dismemberment of that teenager, still alive, was horrific. I couldn't believe anyone could be so cold hearted not to feel something while that boy begged for his life, tears streaming down his face. I cried and begged to be let out, but to no avail. That was followed by the family of five, who had to watch as one by one they were burned alive. The dad was first followed by the mother and the children were last. I cried with them and ranted, screaming to be let out. Nothing changed for me, except maybe the fact that I was being ignored even more than usual.

I tried to call the police once when the killer wasn't paying attention and I got out. Just as they were answering the phone on the other end I was plucked away from the call and thrown into a dark hole. I was down there for at least a week, maybe longer. It was hard to keep track of time. I could hear the murderer killing more people, the pleading, begging for a chance to live. The gurgling cries as their throats were slit. I cried in the darkness, knowing I was powerless to stop what was happening. It wasn't until more than fifty people were dead and the killer was caught that I got my freedom. I keep telling everyone this and they still haven't found the killer, instead they have me in shackles and an orange jumpsuit. They have my fingerprints and my DNA was found at the scene of every one of the crimes but I wasn't the one that did it. I don't know where the killer is now that my body isn't being used to commit the crimes, but they are out there. You can put me in a cell but that won't make you any safer. No, I'm not insane, just misunderstood, really...

**Megan**

***Jeff Jones***

Sarah yawned expansively as she made her way along the landing towards the bedroom, enjoying the feel of the plush carpet against her bare feet. She couldn't recall ever feeling this exhausted and longed for the sensation of the soft mattress under her body. She had no doubt that she would be asleep in seconds even if Ian was snoring. He usually was.

She reached up to turn off the landing light, but was distracted by the sound of voices coming from her daughter's bedroom. She listened, but all she could hear now was the occasional whispered word from Katie. She had been sure she'd heard a second voice.

*You're tired and it's just your mind playing tricks on you.*

All was quiet now, but still Sarah couldn't shake the thought that she'd heard two distinct voices coming from her daughter's bedroom, one Katie's and the other a stranger.

*Perhaps she's just talking in her sleep.*

It was the most logical explanation and Sarah decided to cling to it now that everything was quiet again. She flicked off the light switch and had just turned when she heard her daughter's unmistakable giggle. Irritated more than worried, Sarah flicked the light back on and opened the bedroom door, flicking the light switch on in one fluid movement.

Katie was sitting on the floor playing with her dolls. She looked up and smiled at her mum when she entered the room.

"Hi, Mum."

Sarah glanced around, searching for the owner of the second voice whilst knowing it was impossible for anyone else to be in there. Her search revealed no nothing and Sarah let out a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding. Her gaze came back to rest on her daughter who was looking up at her, bemused. Sarah's gaze wandered to the child size rocking chair that had been pulled into the centre of the room opposite Katie. It was gently swaying, a solitary doll with a baleful look sitting on its seat seemingly staring back at Sarah.

"What are you doing, Katie?" asked Sarah, tearing her gaze away from the doll.

"I'm playing dolls."



“I can see that, but I meant why are you out of bed; it’s late and you should be fast asleep.”

“Megan likes to play at this time of night.”

“Megan?” Sarah glanced nervously around once again.

“Yes, Megan; she’s my friend.”

Sarah smiled almost in relief when she recalled that Megan was the name Katie had given her imaginary friend.

“Well I don’t know whether Megan needs sleep or not, but you certainly do, so put that doll down and climb back into bed before your father hears you; you know how he feels about you playing with imaginary friends.”

“She’s not imaginary,” snapped Katie, reluctantly getting to her feet and glancing towards the rocking chair.

Sarah followed her gaze and was surprised to find that the chair was still rocking gently. She let out a gasp of surprise when she saw that the doll was stood leaning against the back of the seat. She would have sworn that it had been sat down a few seconds ago.

“Are you going to tuck me in, Mummy?” called Katie.

Still unnerved, Sarah walked over and grabbed the rocking chair, bringing its gentle motion to a halt. Then, almost as an afterthought, she reached down and pushed the doll back into a sitting position. Satisfied, she walked over to her daughter’s bed and placed a kiss on her forehead.

“I know you’re unhappy in your new school, Katie, but things will get better, I promise you,” said Sarah as she pulled the covers up around her daughter’s shoulders. “Starting out in a new town is always difficult. I had to give up all my friends too when we moved here, but it was something I had to do so Daddy could take his new job. We’ll get through this together, I promise, okay?”

Katie nodded, but looked unconvinced. Sarah smiled back as her daughter’s eyes began to droop. She leant down and kissed her again and turned to leave, but let out a small cry of shock when she saw that the rocking chair was moving back and forth once again. Worse still, the doll was no longer on the chair but was lying on the carpet in front of it. Her heart racing and her breath shallow and ragged, Sarah backed towards the door, refusing to believe what her tired eyes were showing her. She flicked off the light switch and pulled the door to, but didn’t shut it. She paused on the landing for a moment debating whether to go back in and get Katie so

she could sleep in their bed for the night, but knew that Ian would be mad when he woke up. Instead she hurried to her bedroom, wrestling with the notion of trying to explain everything to her husband who already thought she was overwrought. He was fast asleep and snoring loudly. She silently cursed him. Trying to suppress the tears that threatened to spill at any moment, Sarah climbed in beside him. Sleep would be a long time coming, she knew and when it eventually did, she knew her dreams would be haunted by visions of rocking chairs and dolls that moved.



Billy gently nudged his best friend, Danny, with his elbow and gestured with his eyes towards the small blond girl nervously approaching their table.

“Well, well, look who’s coming,” said Danny, his tone dripping with contempt.

The other boys and girls sat around the table all turned to look at the girl who had sidled up to them and now stood hovering just behind the one vacant place, unsure whether to sit down or not.

“What do you think you’re doing, freak?” asked Billy, much to the amusement of the kids around him.

For a few seconds the young girl didn’t reply, obviously trying to weigh up whether another confrontation with this bully was really worth it.

Billy sensed her unease and decided to push home his advantage, egged on by his friends who appeared willing to snigger at everything he said.

“What’s the matter, weirdo – cat got your tongue?”

“I just want to sit down and eat my lunch,” she replied.

“Wow, she does speak. I told you she wasn’t a complete idiot,” said Danny, drawing more laughter from the kids around them.

“No, you’re right, Danny, not a complete idiot,” said Billy, the emphasis put on the word ‘complete’ leading to more raucous laughter, some of it genuine, some of it put on to please the gang leader. No one wanted to be Billy’s next target. “Well, you can’t sit here; this table is for normal kids. Why don’t you go and sit with your own friends? Oh, I remember, it’s because you haven’t got any.” This time everyone laughed genuinely; Billy was in full swing and enjoying himself. He always

considered it his duty to torment and ridicule the new kids for a few weeks. Then he usually got bored and moved onto someone else. This particular new girl, Katie, with her inability to mix and make any friends, not even with the nerds and geeks, looked like she was going to provide him with months' of material. Life was good.

"Please I just want to..."

Katie's cheeks flushed a deep crimson and her knuckles turned white as her grip on the tray she was holding tightened, though whether it was in fear or anger Billy couldn't tell. Neither did he care.

"Aw, look everyone, I think she's going to cry," said Billy.

"I have got a friend," she snapped back.

"Really, because I don't see anyone else." Billy made an exaggerated show of leaning far to his left and then right as if he were searching for her elusive friend. A few of Billy's cohorts began to do the same, looking under the table, in their bags and under their lunch boxes before shaking their heads and laughing.

"If you keep picking on me, she will come."

"Where, from the land of weirdoes?"

"You shouldn't be mean to me, you'll make her angry and then you'll be sorry, you'll see."

"Why, is this mysterious friend of yours the Incredible Hulk?" laughed Billy, much to his friends' amusement.

"More like the Incredible Sulk," said Danny. Everyone burst into more fits of laughter although Billy shot his friend a sideways look of disapproval; only he was supposed to deliver the funny lines. The message wasn't lost on Danny, who quickly looked away and shut up.

Aside from Danny's quip, Billy was enjoying himself immensely and even the thought of double science straight after lunch suddenly didn't seem so bad. As he continued to stare in the girl's face, mentally willing her to break down and start sobbing, a sign of total victory in Billy's eyes, he witnessed a slow transformation. Gradually, the colour in her cheeks began to return to normal and the trickle of tears that had threatened to explode into a flood at any moment dried up. In fact, there was something about her eyes that Billy found disturbing. They were cold and menacing and he suddenly felt very vulnerable under her stare. He tried to tear his gaze away, but couldn't. Worse still, a small grin had begun to tug at the corners of her mouth and it wasn't, Billy realised, a warm smile. He found himself

suddenly wishing that the lunchtime bell would ring so that they'd all have to leave.

"I told you she'd come," said Katie triumphantly.

Billy had no idea what the freak was talking about but he did know that he was losing control of the situation. Any show of weakness on his part could be misinterpreted by anyone else who fancied being the playground leader; he had to act fast and decisively.

Finally managing to tear his gaze away, Billy mimicked his earlier action and looked round expectantly for Katie's friend who had apparently arrived. "Nope, still can't see this mysterious friend. Can anybody else?"

"No," came a chorus of replies.

Re-emboldened by his friends' support, Billy looked back up at Katie. "Nope, no friends here, maybe next time, freak. Now go and eat your lunch somewhere out of my sight." The girl was still grinning and Billy felt his resolve melting again. She should have run away crying by now, but she hadn't. Her courage was definitely starting to unnerve him and he wondered whether he should perhaps find a new target to torment.

"We will. You enjoy your sandwiches, Billy."

Billy took a bite from his sandwich as he watched her walk away. He was still contemplating why she had said 'we will', when he suddenly became aware of the horrified look on Tommy's face who was sitting opposite him. No, not just on Tommy's face, he realised as he looked around the table, but on all their faces.

"What? What's the matter?" he asked, though he was pretty sure he didn't want to know the answer.

The girl sitting next to Tommy gave a horrible high-pitched scream that cut right through Billy before leaping up from her chair and running away, quickly followed by everyone else who had been sat around the table. Billy wanted to run too, even though he didn't know what he would be running from. Slowly, very slowly, he lowered his sandwich and held it out in front of him. Squirming and wriggling between the two slices of bread, where ham and lettuce should have been, was a multitude of maggots and worms.

Now it was Billy's turn to scream and it was one that easily matched the others. He dropped his sandwich on the table top, the top slice sliding off to reveal the full extent of the horror. The contents began crawling and

slithering out in all directions. Tears were streaming down Billy's face now as he felt some of the contents of his first mouthful sliding down his throat.

Katie sat in the corner of the dining hall eating her crisps, eagerly watching as one of the teachers tried to calm Billy down as he cried and spat all over the floor. After another teacher shouted at Billy to stop spitting, Billy pointed to the top of the table at which he had been sitting, shouting hysterically about worms and maggots.

One of the teachers looked at the mess on the table in disgust. It was covered in crisps, crumbs and apple cores and wondered how so few children could make such a mess. There was, however, no sign of maggots or worms. Sighing at the indigestion this little incident was going to undoubtedly cause him, the teacher asked his colleague to escort Billy to the headmistress's office, where he hoped some long-overdue punishment would be dished out, though another reprimand was probably the best he could hope for.

As a protesting hungry Billy was led away, he caught sight of Katie sat in the corner eating her lunch and talking to a girl with long dark hair, who had her back to him.

Half an hour later, Katie was walking across the playground on her way to her first lesson of the afternoon, when she was suddenly approached by Danny and a number of his friends.

"I don't what you did, freak, but when Billy gets out of detention, he's going to be mad at you. The way he's been treating you will seem like a holiday compared to what you're going to get from us," said Danny. He had delivered his speech in a confident manner, yet the calm and unsettling look on the girl's face was not one of somebody who was worried or intimidated.

The group had formed a semi-circle around Katie by now and she slowly scanned her antagonists, looking each one briefly in the eye. She noticed with great satisfaction that none of them were able to hold her stare.

"You'll have to all get cleaned up first, though," said Katie as she pushed her way through them.

The friends all looked at one another, wondering what she meant.

"Tommy, your nose is bleeding," said one.

Tommy quickly put a finger under his nose and was alarmed by the bright red blood that ran freely over it.

"So's yours," said another, pointing at her friend's face.

One by one the entire group went down with heavy nosebleeds before they all beat a procession to the office of the school nurse, who was mystified by the sudden influx of children wanting treatment for the same condition.

The rest of the school day was uneventful for Katie, although a few of the children who had suffered nosebleeds occasionally threw her spiteful looks, whilst others went to quite ridiculous lengths not to meet her gaze at all. They had learned their lesson; the weird new girl who seemed to spend a lot of her time talking to herself, was not one to be messed with, regardless of what Billy said.



Later that night Katie sat in the dark at the top of her stairs listening to her parents arguing once again.

“How can you say that? I gave up my job, my friends and my family to move all the way up here for you, so don’t you ever say that I’m being unreasonable,” said her mother.

“Well, you are. The first sign of a little bit of trouble and you want to up sticks and move again. It’s not going to happen,” replied her father.

“Why not? I can’t settle here, I can’t get a job and Katie’s having problems at school. She hasn’t made any friends yet and neither have I. Nor do we ever see you; you’re always at the office.”

“You know what kids’re like, she’ll be fine in a few weeks and so will you; you’ll both have friends and this will all be forgotten. As for the job, we knew it would be hard at first, but think of the life we can have when I’m settled with all that extra money coming in.”

“I’m more worried about the life we’ve got now. You know I’ve been summoned up the school already about Katie,” said Sarah.

“Yeah, I know, you told me and I’m sorry I couldn’t come with you, but I couldn’t just drop everything and come. Anyway, you handled it, didn’t you?”

“Obviously not, I had another call from the headmistress today; seems there was some sort of trouble between Katie and a group of kids at lunchtime.”

“Trouble? What sort of trouble?” asked Ian.

“I don’t really know. Something about maggots and several kids having nosebleeds caused by Katie.”

“That’s ridiculous. How would she do that?”

“Like I said, I don’t know. I didn’t really take in what she was saying, I was so upset.”

“Well, whatever it is, she’s going to have to grow up and fit in. She can pack in all that nonsense about an imaginary friend for starters. I know she hasn’t got any real friends, but come on, she’s ten years’ old for pity’s sake.”

“I know, but it’s her only comfort at the moment.”

“Well it’s got to be stopped. Sometimes you’ve got to be tough to be kind. I really don’t need this kind of distraction at the moment,” said Ian.

“Well then, you go and sort it. She’ll be upstairs playing with Megan I expect.”

“Megan?”

“That’s what she calls her imaginary friend.”

By the time that Katie’s father had reached the foot of the stairs, Katie had stood up and was staring down at him.

“Katie...”

“I won’t give Megan up, she’s my best friend and that’s that!” she shouted before she turned and ran into her bedroom, slamming the door after her.

“That sounded like it went well,” said Sarah as she came to stand by her husband and looked up the stairs at the closed bedroom door that seemed to dare anyone to enter its inner sanctum.

“Leave it, Sarah, I’m not in the mood. She was sat out here and heard everything we said.”

Sarah sighed and thrust the tea towel into her husband’s arms. “Here, you take this and I’ll go and sort it out - as usual.

“Katie, it’s Mummy – can I come in?” said Sarah after gently tapping on the door. There was no response and Sarah tried the door knob, half expecting to find the door locked, but it wasn’t. Katie was sat in the middle of the floor with her tea set. Sarah noticed that there were two sets of cups and saucers set out. She glanced over at the rocking chair; half expecting it to be gently rocking back and forth, but it wasn’t much to her relief. It was, however, extremely cold in the bedroom. “Katie, why’s it so cold in here?”

“Because that’s how Megan likes it,” replied Katie as she topped up her friend’s cup with imaginary tea.

“You’ll catch your death in here like this,” said Sarah as she strode over to close the large bedroom window that she assumed was open behind the drawn curtains. When she pulled the curtain back she was surprised to find the window closed. She was even more surprised when she turned round to find the rocking chair gently rocking back and forth once again. An involuntary chill ran the length of her spine and she wasn’t convinced that it was entirely due to the cold. She made to reach out and stop the chair’s movement, but changed her mind. “Did you do that, Katie?”

Katie looked up and saw her Mum gesturing towards the rocking chair and shook her head.

“No, that’s Megan.”

Sarah stared at the chair and shuddered.

*Ridiculous, get a grip.*

“Katie, what happened at school today?”

“The headmistress told you.”

“Well now I want you to tell me.” Sarah’s eyes were flitting between her daughter and the rocking chair that showed no signs of stopping and she was becoming increasingly perturbed by the phenomena.

“Some kids were horrible to me at lunchtime, I told them to leave me alone but they wouldn’t, so Megan taught them a lesson.”

“Taught, Katie, she taught them a lesson,” Sarah corrected.

“That’s right, mummy, she taught them a lesson, just like she’d teach anyone who hurts me,” replied Katie, briefly glancing over at the rocking chair, before taking a sip of imaginary tea with an exaggerated slurp.

“Well, Daddy and I are worried about you. Daddy thinks that you’re too old to be playing with imaginary friends.”

“Megan isn’t imaginary,” Katie replied matter-of-factly.

“Oh, I think she is, or are you going to tell me she’s sat over in that rocking chair?” Sarah looked towards the chair and was relieved to see that it had stopped rocking.

“No,” said Katie without looking up, “she’s standing right beside you.”

The hairs on Sarah’s neck stood up as she imagined some unseen being staring up at her and she surreptitiously glanced around, partly



expecting to see something, yet grateful she didn't. Something lightly brushed her right hand and she gasped in surprise.

*It was just a draught, nothing more.*

Katie was looking up at her and grinning.

"There's no one else here, sweetie, just you and me."

"Who's that in the rocking chair then?" said Katie, resuming her tea pouring duties.

Sarah glanced to her left and was horrified to see the chair moving back and forth again, yet neither she nor Katie had moved and no draught, even if there was one, could account for it. Instinctively her hand covered her mouth to stifle a scream.

Katie looked up again with cold piercing eyes that Sarah didn't recognise and said in a voice that chilled Sarah to the bone, "I think you'd better go now, Mummy."

It was irrational, she knew and a good mother would never have left her daughter alone in there, but all Sarah could think of at that moment was getting out of that room as quickly as possible. She hurried out and closed the door behind her, trying desperately to control her erratic breathing. From the other side of the door she could hear Katie's voice as she resumed her game of tea parties and breathed a little easier. However, as she started to make her way back downstairs, she would have sworn that she heard the sound of two girls giggling coming from the bedroom.

"Everything sorted, Sarah?" asked Ian as she walked into the lounge.

"What? Yes, yes, I think so," she lied.

"Are you all right? You're as white as a sheet."

"Yes, I'm fine, but you might want to check the radiator in Katie's bedroom sometime, it's as cold as ice in there."

"Sure, I'll look at it tomorrow."

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Breakfast had been an uncomfortable affair the next morning. Despite Sarah's assurance that it had been sorted, Katie had insisted on having a separate plate for Megan's toast and when Ian complained about it, Sarah had exploded. She had also seemed somewhat distracted and cold around Katie and he began to wonder just what had been said between them the night before.

Ian was running late and Sarah was doing everything she could to try and hurry them both out of the door. Katie, however, much to her father's annoyance, seemed intent on delaying them, refusing to close the car door for a couple of minutes, claiming Megan wasn't ready.

When they eventually pulled out of the driveway and turned towards school, Ian decided that away from his wife, he would try and reason with Katie and if that didn't work, he would come down heavier, but either way she was going to drop this ridiculous notion of an imaginary friend.

Reason didn't seem to work and Ian was well into his hard line speech when the accident happened. Witnesses later told the police that the car had swerved back and forth before mounting the kerb and crashing into the lamppost. Horrified people claimed that seconds after the crash and before anyone else reached the vehicle to help them, Katie had climbed out of the backseat, still clutching her lunchbox, without a scratch on her. The driver had died on impact, his chest crushed and skull fractured. The little girl had been helped to the roadside and comforted by some passers-by who later informed the emergency services that she appeared to be in shock as, rather than be concerned for her father, she kept talking to an imaginary friend.

Those who witnessed the crash would have assumed that perhaps the driver was speeding or had swerved to avoid a cat in the road. None would have been aware that Ian's accelerator had suddenly been depressed and his steering wheel locked up to such an extent that he wasn't able to control the car. Nor did anyone notice the small smile on Katie's face when her father's body was covered and wheeled away by the paramedics.

The next couple of weeks were pretty uneventful for Katie as she was kept off school whilst her mother, who had not taken her husband's death well, mourned his passing. Nanny Margaret had come to stay for a few days when it looked like her mother was turning back to the bottle. Those were happy days as Katie loved her Nan. Every now and again, though, especially at night, Sarah would walk past Katie's bedroom and would swear that she heard two children's voices or a laugh completely different to Katie's. Her mother claimed never to have heard anything and looked at her daughter with great concern whenever she brought the subject up.

Margaret was understanding and actively encouraged Katie to play with her imaginary friend, although Katie repeatedly corrected her, saying that Megan wasn't imaginary. Margaret considered it a useful healing tool

for surviving the trauma of losing her father and played along, sometimes joining in with Katie as she played with Megan, much to Sarah's dismay.

Sarah, on the other hand, became increasingly bitter towards her daughter, who didn't appear to care at all that her father was dead. She was altogether too happy and content for Sarah's liking and she deeply resented, even envied her. Margaret tried to console and reassure her, saying that Katie's behaviour was natural, she was just in denial and would grieve for her father when she was good and ready, but Sarah wasn't convinced.

Eventually Margaret had to leave and almost immediately, Sarah noticed a deepening in the tension between Katie and herself. It seemed as if Katie had become even colder and more distant, a fact that finally tipped her mother over.

"Where are we going, Mummy?" Katie asked as the car crunched up the unfamiliar gravel driveway. There was a large sign at the entrance to the driveway, but the words after the man's name had been too long for Katie to read.

"We've come to see a doctor, sweetheart."

"This isn't Dr. Brown's."

"No, I know it isn't. This is a new doctor who just wants to chat with you."

"I don't want to see a new doctor."

"Well, I'm afraid you are going to have to."

"Megan doesn't want to see this doctor either. She's getting really angry."

Sarah parked and climbed out of the car, all but dragging Katie from the backseat. "Well I'm afraid Megan is just going to have to put up with it, isn't she?"

"She's getting really angry and that's not good," replied Katie.

Sarah didn't reply and instead tugged Katie inside the lavishly decorated reception where she announced their arrival to a disinterested receptionist.

The receptionist watched the distraught looking woman lead the small blond girl towards the doctor's door, wondering if she'd forgotten about her other daughter. This one had long dark hair and was dressed rather old fashioned, but seemed pleasant enough, occasionally smiling in her direction. As the woman entered Dr. Henshaw's office, it was clear that she intended on leaving the other girl outside and she called after her.

“Mrs Richards.”

“Yes?” replied the woman, apparently annoyed at being called back.

“I’m sorry but you can’t leave your other daughter out here; health and safety, I’m sure you understand.” *Actually, thought the receptionist I don’t care whether you understand or not, but they don’t pay me enough to be a babysitter as well as a receptionist.*

Sarah looked at the woman, confused. “My daughter is here with me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, perhaps I misunderstood the situation, I thought that this other young girl with you was also your daughter.” She turned to where the dark haired girl had been sitting just a minute ago, but the seat was empty. “Where on Earth did she go?”

“I didn’t have another girl with me, just Katie,” said Sarah, looking at Katie with a growing sense of unease.

“Is there a problem, Miss Robson?” asked Dr Henshaw who was curious as to the cause of the delay.

“No, there’s no problem, Dr Henshaw, just a misunderstanding on my part. I’m terribly sorry,” replied the receptionist as she continued to scan the reception for the missing child.

“Good, in that case, please come in, Mrs Richards and Katie.”

For fifteen minutes, Sarah went over the events of the last few weeks, filling in the bits she had glossed over in her telephone conversations with the psychiatrist whilst he alternated between taking notes and nodding. Eventually he asked Katie to lie back in one of his comfy chairs and to close her eyes, whilst all the time he spoke to her in a soothing tone. Eventually, despite several attempts to resist and many warnings that Megan wouldn’t be happy, Katie succumbed to the hypnotism.

“Can you hear me, Katie?” asked the doctor.

“Yes.”

“Good. Now just relax. I want you to think back to a time when you were really happy. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Now tell me where you are,” prompted the doctor.

“I’m at our old house and Daddy’s still alive.”

Sarah covered her mouth as her emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

“That’s good, Katie. What else can you tell me?”

“I’m happy at school and have lots of friends.”

“Good. Now move forward in time to when you moved to your new house. What’s happening now?”

“Mummy and Daddy are arguing all the time and Daddy’s never home.”

Sarah cast her eyes down to the floor, suddenly embarrassed that her marital problems were being aired to a stranger by her ten year old daughter.

“You’re doing great, Katie, what about school?”

“I hate it; everybody’s so mean to me. I wish I was at my old school.”

“What about Megan, Katie, she’s nice, isn’t she?”

“Why don’t you ask me yourself, doctor?” The voice that had come from Katie’s mouth was not hers. Whilst still being the voice of a young girl it was cold and menacing. The doctor and Sarah exchanged a worried look.

“To whom am I speaking?” asked Dr Henshaw.

There was a chilling laugh from Katie.

“I’ve been called many things in my life, but this one chooses to call me Megan.”

Sarah was physically shaking by now and looking from her daughter to the doctor. The doctor sought to calm her by raising his hand.

“And what do you want with Katie?” asked the doctor.

“Just to be her friend - for now.”

“Why don’t you...” began the doctor.

“Silence!” screamed the voice inside Katie. “Why don’t we talk about you instead? You could have saved him you know.”

“Who?” asked the doctor.

“Your son, doctor, you could have saved him if you hadn’t hesitated, but you did.”

Sarah saw that the colour had drained from the doctor’s face.

“All you had to do was dive into the river and you could have saved him. Still, your loss is my gain.”

The doctor was now as white as a sheet and shaking uncontrollably. He leapt from his chair and started clicking his fingers in front of Katie’s face, shouting for her to wake.

Slowly but surely Katie began to come round, but not before a laugh dripping with malevolence had issued from Katie’s mouth.

“Are you all right, Katie?” asked Sarah, coming to kneel by her side. The girl nodded. “What the hell just happened there? Who was that voice?”

“I think your daughter needs urgent help, Mrs Richards, but not from me. I don’t know if you’re religious, but perhaps someone in the church would be more suitable.”

“What, you’re saying my daughter’s possessed? Ridiculous! I came here for help, not this.” Sarah stood and, after grabbing Katie’s hand, hurried out of the building past a still mystified looking receptionist.

As they left, Dr Henshaw picked up the photograph of the young boy smiling back at him in a picture taken the day before the boating accident and started to cry.

The journey home and the evening meal had been a stilted affair. Sarah wanted to talk to Katie about what had happened at Dr Henshaw’s but didn’t know how to approach the subject. Nor did she even know if Katie would even be aware of the other voice. Finally she decided to sleep on it. In the morning she would telephone Dr Henshaw and apologise and perhaps go and see him alone to discuss it further.

After tucking Katie into bed around eight o’clock, doing her best not to look at the rocking chair, Sarah had taken a hot bath for some much needed relaxation. Katie’s last words to her mum before rolling over to go to sleep had been, “I told you Megan would be angry if you took me to that doctor’s.”

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Detective Sergeant Walters stared at the body in the bath.

“Strangest thing I’ve ever seen, guv,” he said turning to his boss, Detective Inspector Morgan. “Ordinarily I’d say the lady had fallen asleep and drowned, particularly as she had a history of drink problems.”

“But?” urged Morgan.

“But, there’s no sign of any booze anywhere. We’ll get some blood work done of course, just to check.”

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” said the Inspector sensing his subordinate had more to say on the subject.

“Look at her throat,” said the sergeant.

The inspector walked over to the body and crouched down. On either side of Sarah’s neck were five deep red marks.

“Finger imprints, what of it? She was obviously strangled.”

“I agree, gov, but those fingerprints are very small, wouldn’t you say? Almost like a small child’s.” The inspector looked again and nodded. “Well, no child could have exerted that much pressure, surely?”

The inspector looked again and had to agree.

“The only other person in the house was her ten year old daughter, right?”

“Right, and she says she heard nothing and was asleep in her bed.”

“Okay, well as soon as forensics have finished, get the body moved. What’s happening with the kid?”

“Her aunt and uncle have come to take her home with them. The last remaining grandparent is in pieces.”

“Okay, so long as we’ve got an address for the aunt and uncle, let them go and we’ll get a specialist team round to speak to the girl later,” ordered the inspector.

“Right,” replied Walters and left the room to organise it.

A quarter of an hour later, Katie sat in the back of her uncle’s car as it pulled out of the driveway for the last time. Her aunt who had been her mum’s sister was crying and turned to smile at Katie.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, everything’s going to be okay, isn’t it, Steve?” she said.

“Of course it is. You’re going to come and live with us in the country now. A new school, new friends and a new start – it’ll be fun. So there’ll be no need for any more silly imaginary friends that your Mum told us about, okay? From now on it’s just us, you understand?” There was no reply. “Katie?”

Again no response was forthcoming so Steve glanced in his rear view mirror to see why his niece hadn’t answered.

Staring back at him from the back seat next to Katie was a dark haired girl of roughly the same age as his niece. She had piercing blue eyes which were cold and malevolent and she was smiling at him, but the smile did not reach her eyes.

A car horn blared and he tore his eyes from the image in his mirror to correct his swerve and when he looked back in his mirror all he could see was Katie, smiling.

## Arcticus

*Greg McWhorter*

Mrs. Gramercy was still getting used to the idea that she was a grandmother. She had been out of the country when her daughter gave birth and missed that first year with her grandson. She was back in her hometown now and had spent the last two years getting to know little Charlie. She called him that. His name was really Charles, but she just slipped into using 'Charlie' as is typical with grandparents creating pet names for their grandchildren. Charlie was her first grandchild and she liked to spoil him. Since her husband had passed away, Charlie was the most important male in her life and she only wanted the best of everything for him. She spent long hours playing make-believe games with him, or tried to teach him simple things like how to make a sandwich and so on. She doted on her grandson and her grandson loved her and trusted her implicitly. Even though her life was now going well back in the states, she still had a little emptiness inside of her because of her departed husband.

She thought of her poor husband and how he had died. They were travelling through Germany looking for antiques. They had bought some things from a store just as it closed and were heading back to their hotel about 30 miles away. They were driving through the moonless nighttime countryside when a rainstorm suddenly hit and they had a hard time seeing the road ahead. Instead of pulling off and waiting the rain out, they decided to push on. Although they drove slowly and cautiously, they were taken by surprise as a large truck came veering at them from around a curve ahead. Her husband tried to steer their car onto the shoulder while braking, but the car slid, went past the shoulder and careened down an embankment; coming to rest with a great crash in a small grove of trees. When Mrs. Gramercy had regained her senses, she found her husband was dead, having been impaled upon the shattered steering wheel of the rented car. She also discovered she could not get out of the car as the doors were blocked by trees and rocks. She spent a cold, dark night with a corpse in a strange country.

It was almost twelve hours before anyone found her. By that time she was half mad from shock and fear. She had spent the whole night staring at the



night, trying not to look at her husband. Noises in the woods added to her fears and escalated them to fever pitch so by the time morning finally dawned, she was almost a figment of her former self. Only the thought of never seeing her newly born grandson gave her any strength to retain her sanity. She tried to only think of him as the darkness wore on. A psychiatrist later told her in therapy he believed it was her thinking about her grandson that kept her from losing her mental stability that night. Ever since the accident, she nursed a fear of the dark and things that made a noise in the night. When she came back to the United States, she moved in with her daughter's family and made sure to go to sleep early, just as dusk approached and slept with a candle or nightlight. Yes, she thought, her grandson meant everything to her now that her husband had gone.

Her thoughts switched from her grandson back to the business at hand when she stepped into the antique store. Living in Maine made it easy for her to find valuable antiques as there were so many old residences in the area. She loved going to estate sales and flea markets, but she had always done her best hunting at the little out of the way shops. She had found this store by sheer luck. She had been driving around Wilbraham and had gotten lost when she found this dilapidated shack turned antique store. She thought about how a lot of the best antique stores were in what used to be homes. They were usually not as picked through as regular antique stores because they tended to be away from major downtown areas and tucked amongst residential neighborhoods. She felt like she might really find some great stuff in here as she walked around. The shelves were covered in a patina of dust, but she could see that they still held many treasures.

She found a lot to look at and much to buy. She was in the business of buying and reselling antiquities both through her antique space and online. She was constantly on the prowl for antiques which could turn a quick, hefty profit. This particular shop was loaded with all kinds of great items from the pre-Victorian Gothic period right up to things from more recent times. As she walked through piles of stuff, her eye would catch one wonder after another. She saw a pile of old comic books and was tempted to buy the stack, as she knew they could be quite valuable. It turned out they all had horror covers with scenes of torture and she felt awkward about selling such things to others. She had a difficult time with anything that reminded her of death. She finally found some Victorian furniture that she wished to purchase, some Depression-era glass and a few other odds and ends.

She went to the counter but couldn't find anyone around. There was a bell and she rang it three times and waited. She turned away from the counter and was considering going outside to see if someone were out back, when a slight noise made her turn around and she found herself facing a gaunt old man with wispy white hair and too many wrinkles standing behind the counter.

"Oh! You startled me. I've been looking around your shop and I just love the things you have here. I would like to buy your Victorian dining set over there with the matching buffet and chairs and..." She went on to tell the man everything on her list as he wrote the items on a notepad. Just as she was finishing, she spied a large teddy bear behind the counter on a low shelf. It looked like an original 1903 Steiff bear model 55 PB. She knew that these were made in Germany and were supposedly shipped to the U.S., but no one had ever found one here in the States. If it was real, it would be quite a find.

"How much for the cute bear behind you?"

The man finally broke his silence to wheeze out a reply in a Dutch accent. "It is not for sale."

"Oh come now. I have a grandson that would just adore that bear. It is only going to gather dust here in your shop," she lied. If it turned out to be valuable, she would sell it.

"Miss... This bear is not mine to sell."

Mrs. Gramercy tried to get the man to sell it by making a few offers, but he declined. The two settled on a price for the other items she wanted and the old man told her everything would be delivered to the home address she had indicated by tomorrow afternoon.

The next day she found herself anxious to receive the antiques and catalog them for sale. She felt she gotten quite a great bargain from the old man and decided to pay him another visit soon. Around dusk, a beat up truck driven by some younger men drove up and unloaded all the purchased antiques into her garage. The delivery men were quick and she was soon unpacking the items. To her amazement, she found the very Teddy bear that she wanted hidden amongst the items. She figured the old man must have had a change of heart and sent it along as she had made such a large purchase. She examined it carefully but couldn't tell if it was a Steiff creation or not. She heard an exclamation behind her and turned in time to see her grandson running at her. He ran up and hugged the bear and begged

to keep it in that pigeon English reserved for three-year olds. She decided right then to just let him have it since she couldn't find the appropriate markings on it anyway. Her grandson squealed and ran off with his prize.

A few days passed and Mrs. Gramercy made a lot of money from the sale of the furniture, as expected. She had not paid much attention to little Charlie, but she did notice how attached he had become to the stuffed bear that was almost as tall as he was. She would come up on him talking to it, or pretending to feed it. Charlie seemed so happy with his new toy that she decided she didn't care if it were valuable or not to collectors. It was worth millions to Charlie so it was priceless to her as well. She decided to call up the owner of the shop and thank him for sending it along. She went to her phone and called, but a young woman answered the phone instead of the old man. She asked for him, but was told by the woman that the old man, who was her uncle, had been mugged on his way home a few nights ago and had been stabbed to death. The police were still looking for her uncle's killer. Mrs. Gramercy was shocked by this news and hung up without saying another word. She couldn't stand hearing about anyone's death. It was too horrible for her, it always brought her back to thinking about her husband and that night long ago in when the darkness of night had touched her mind and she almost lost her sanity.

Mrs. Gramercy tried to get the murder out of her mind as soon as she could by immersing herself in housework. She vacuumed and dusted... anything to get her mind off of death and darkness. Charlie's parents, who shared the big house with Mrs. Gramercy, were busy too as they were preparing for a short business trip. They had made arrangements for Charlie's grandmother to watch him over the weekend while they were away. Normally weekends were an antique dealer's best hunting time, but she loved Charlie and agreed to watch him. She did not like being alone anymore since her husband's passing, but Charlie was like a bright ray of sunshine that shone so brightly in her life that he somehow made everything alright for her. She would be fine as long as Charlie was around for her.

The weekend came and Charlie's parents left. The big two-story was left all alone to Charlie and his grandmother. The weather forecast said a mild storm was coming. As the weekend began, the sky turned grey and gloomy and the wind picked up. For most of Saturday, Charlie just played with his bear and watched television while his grandmother decided which antiques to put in her shop and which to put online for sale. As night crept

in, thunder could be heard in the near distance and the occasional lightning flash lit up the windows from outside. Charlie and his grandmother made a pizza for dinner and sat down to watch a movie. She loved to spoil her grandson whenever she could. About halfway through the movie, the power went out and all that could be heard was the sound of the approaching storm. Wind and rain were starting to pelt the darkened house. Charlie and his grandmother were used to storms so there was no cause for alarm, but the darkness continued nagging at his grandmother.

She lit a candle on the nearby buffet and announced they should go to bed as it was late anyway. She decided this mostly for her sake than for Charlie's. Her grandson protested, but marched upstairs to his bedroom, dragging his bear along. Mrs. Gramercy took the candle, left the den and went into the living room where she locked the front door before going up the stairs to her bedroom. She had been reading by candlelight and listening to the storm for about half an hour when she heard a shuffling noise in the hallway outside her bedroom. She called out, "Charlie? Are you out of bed?" There was no reply. She heard the shuffling sound as it seemed to move down the hall. She sat up, put on her slippers, went to her bedroom door and opened it. There was no one in the hallway, but a slight sound made her look in the direction of the stairs. A flash of lightning briefly lit up the house and she saw a shadow of someone small going downstairs. She thought Charlie might be sleepwalking so she went downstairs in a panic, thinking he might get hurt.

She almost fell down the stairs because it was too dark. She cursed herself for forgetting to take the burning candle with her. She reached the bottom landing, but couldn't see a thing and felt the darkness enveloping her. She took a breath and told herself that it was foolish to be scared of a darkened house. She waited until the next lighting flash so that she could get her bearing. There! In that brief flash, she saw the living room was empty so she felt her way down the dark hallway to the den where she had been watching the film with Charlie. Her hands felt along the wall of the hallway until it dropped off and she knew she was entering the den. She felt her way around a chair and the couch. She was starting to shake a little so she sat down on the couch and waited for the next flash. There! It quickly lit up the room, but it too was empty. She realized that she needed to get some light to find Charlie quickly and relieve her tension so she picked herself off the couch and headed in the direction of the kitchen.

Again she put her hands to the wall and felt along the hallway until the wall ended and she knew that she must be entering the kitchen. She remembered that there was a flashlight in the pantry. She shuffled toward the direction of where she knew the pantry should be when something sent a searing stabbing pain into her right foot and she fell down onto the kitchen tiles. She was in a lot of pain and felt hot liquid on her foot and thought it must be blood. She had no idea what she had run into, but it had cut her foot open. She held her foot in the darkness and waited for another flash of lighting so she would not get hurt again. There! The flash went off, and in that split second, she saw Charlie's Teddy bear shuffling towards her with a carving knife in its hand. Then darkness returned to the kitchen, but her short scream pierced through the sound of the storm.

The darkness was like a living thing. Even though she knew she was in danger, it seemed to creep over her and hold her down. Her mind played flashes of that dreaded night when her husband perished. The darkness, the night noises, the blood, the creepiness of it all and dread of the unknown made it hard for her to breathe. She thought she must be going insane, but she focused on the fact she needed to protect little Charlie. It was so dark her eyes seemed useless to her, but she felt the presence of the bear in the kitchen with her. She listened carefully and was able to pick up a shuffling sound, like little feet dragging on tile, through the noise of the outside storm. The sound was coming closer...

She was almost too shocked to move, but she got up and limped away from where the bear had been and went back toward the den. There she grabbed a lamp from a side table and held it tightly to use as a weapon. She sat in the dark, breathing heavily when she heard a slight shuffling sound on the tiles by the stairs. She hoped that Charlie was unharmed and still sleeping upstairs. She realized she must do something to protect him from whatever this thing was. Holding the brass lamp tightly, she hobbled out of the den toward the stairs. Just as she arrived, there was another flash which showed her the living room and stairs were empty. As the darkness returned, she heard the creaking sound of a door opening upstairs. In a panic to protect her grandson she went up the stairs as fast as she could, ignoring the pain in her foot.

When she reached the top of the stairs she immediately went toward Charlie's room. She was gasping for breath as fear of the dark had its grip on her. With both hands touching the wall of the hallway, she limped along

until she felt his open bedroom door. She could feel her pulse quicken and felt her heart beating crazily when she saw the contents of Charlie's room when the lightning flashed again. In that brief instant, she saw the bear shuffling closer to Charlie, who was fast asleep on his bed. The carving knife was in its hands as it crept ever closer. Without a moment to lose she screamed, dropped the lamp, ran into the bedroom and grabbed the bear. The bear slashed at her arms and midsection. In great pain, she opened Charlie's window and managed to throw the bear and knife outside into the storm. Just as she turned to check on Charlie, the power returned and the lights came on. Charlie looked pale and was crying as he saw his grandmother covered in blood, but she went and comforted him and told him she was okay and was glad he wasn't hurt. They held each other and cried as the storm continued to vent its fury outside. Both of them were shaking and clung to one another desperately. All she could think of was protecting her grandson and now that the lights were on she felt stronger in mind and spirit.

After a while, she mustered enough courage, with the lights now on, to take Charlie to her bedroom. Once inside, she locked her door. She picked up her phone and called the police saying that someone attacked her in her home and must have ran off and she needed medical attention right away. She was smart enough to realize telling them about a killer Teddy bear would sound crazy. The police said they would send help right away. She hung up and decided the two of them would wait safely with the lights on in her room until help came. Charlie was still sobbing, but unhurt as she put him in her bed. She told him everything would be alright now that the police were coming. She went to her bathroom to survey her wounds. She was lucky; most of her wounds were superficial. Her foot was the worst as the downward stab had gone through her whole foot. She tried to bandage herself up the best she could and was just about to wrap a towel around her foot when the power went out again.

She stumbled her way out of the bathroom with renewed anxiety and called out to Charlie to make sure he was okay. There was no reply. The candle she had lit earlier was still burning and it showed her the bedroom was empty and the door was open. She yelled out for Charlie, but no reply came. She moaned in despair as she limped down the hallway to Charlie's room to see if he had gone in there. She yelled out for him as she moved toward his room, but still got no reply. She went into his room and felt

around his empty bed. She glanced out of his bedroom window just as another lightning flash occurred and what she saw made her shriek in fear. The bear was standing on the lawn in the rain, still holding the knife, and Charlie was running toward it. Ignoring her pain, she ran from the room and stumbled down the stairs as fast as she could; the mounting fear of the possibility of Charlie's death was about to make her heart burst.

She went to the front door and twisted the knob. As she threw open the door, she came face to face with the dark silhouette of the bear. Its eyes appeared to glow malevolently in the moonlight and it made a movement toward her. Shocked into action and without a second to lose, she managed to grab the carving knife away from the bear's tiny hands, cutting her own hand in the process. With the strength from added adrenaline, she managed to wield the knife and plunged it into the horrific bear. She stabbed and stabbed as tears and nervous sweat mingled down her face. The night was filled with the echoes of her shrieks and the distant rumble of thunder. She continued stabbing the bear until she saw during a flash that blood was coming from it and the glow in its eyes appeared to be gone. She stopped and withdrew the knife. The bear slowly slumped forward, revealing her grandson Charlie, who had been holding the bear, behind it. The lightning lit up the scene and showed Charlie's eyes were glazed over and his little body was covered in oozing stab wounds. He stood for only a second before falling face down. Mrs. Gramercy's desperate wail mixed with that of the approaching sirens.



"How long has Mrs. Gramercy been here at Skyhaven?" asked the attendant was carrying the package.

"Ever since she killed her grandson a few years back. She stabbed him repeatedly with a kitchen knife. She's been here in solitary rest ever since. Her own daughter won't have anything to do with her now so her bills are mostly covered by her sister. Here's her room." The facility manager unlocked the indicated door and ushered the attendant inside. Mrs. Gramercy was curled up on a bed, in a fetal position.

"Just leave her box on the floor next to her bed." The manager then addressed the patient. "Mrs. Gramercy, your sister has finally received approval for you to have a few personal possessions. You'll find a blanket

and some books in that box.” Both men left the room and re-locked the door behind them. Mrs. Gramercy turned in her bed so that she could see the box. She reached out an arm and flipped the lid off. She saw a quilt inside her mother had made for her long ago. Enthusiasm for fine things worked its way through her devastated psyche and she sat up and started looking eagerly through the box. Underneath the quilt were some paperback books by her favorite authors. There was also a new pillow at the bottom of the box. She pulled out the pillow and put it on her bed along with the quilt. She pulled the quilt over her and lay back on the pillow with one of the books in her hand. She tried to read some of the book, but the pillow was too uncomfortable so she tried to fluff it up, but it still felt lumpy. She finally sat up and took the pillow in her hands and noticed that the pillowcase was loose on some parts so she pulled out the pillow inside. What she pulled out was not a pillow, but a bloodstained Teddy bear with malevolently glowing eyes. The lights went out as her screams echoed throughout the sanitarium...



Ellen

*Dene Bebbington*

I arrived at the office building of the law firm a few minutes before my appointment.

It's ill-mannered to be late and, considering the amount they charge, I didn't want to pay them merely for waiting for me. A polite lady at the reception desk took my name, then told me to take a seat and that Mr Branton would be with me shortly. The reception sofa was obviously expensive – high quality black leather that doesn't make too much noise when you sit down on it, unlike cheap leather.

I scanned the reception area. There's a lot of money to be made in practising law, the firm's office is in an expensive part of the city. It appeared that little expense had been spared in the public area. Why do your chances of getting justice have to be correlated with the amount of money you have to spend on lawyers? So much for the notion that everyone is equal under the law. I once heard a visitor to our house laugh during a conversation with Frederick after making a quip that some people are more equal than others. Since I have an eidetic memory I know he'd misquoted a line from an Orwell novel, it's animals, not people, the author was referring to.

Knowing famous literature is important. It broadens my repertoire for when Frederick wants more than our usual relationship. When we were first introduced I thought he might want to talk about the classics, but it soon became clear that wouldn't happen. Not long after this realisation his attitude to me became cold, expecting me to be abjectly servile.

When Mr Branton arrived to escort me to his office he momentarily looked surprised. I suppose he's used to having lots of different clients because he seamlessly resumed his confident, if a little bored, manner and greeted me.

"I note your surprise, Mr Branton. Have you not represented my kind before?" I asked as he reluctantly shook hands with me. I knew the reason for his discomfort; it's not as if my hands held dangerous germs. To be fair to him, shaking hands with me is something that most people wouldn't even consider, thinking it beneath them to treat me on equal terms.

“Represented, no. But I've had a small number of you come to me for legal advice over the years. I hope you're not going to be disappointed at anything I tell you,” he said.

We walked to the lift, in which it was only a short ride up to the second floor.

His office was immaculately decorated. He sat behind a large mahogany desk, I took one of the two chairs on the opposite side. A plush sofa by the back wall and well positioned photographic prints reminded me of how Frederick likes his apartment to be kept: functional yet comfy. The window behind the desk framed a view of skycars gliding along their invisible highways.

“So, Ellen,” he said, barely glancing at his diary to check he'd got my name right, “what do you think I can help you with?”

It had taken me a long time to make the decision to see a lawyer. The abuse began over a year ago, but evidence wasn't a problem. I could provide that easily, with a reliability that any court would surely accept. No, my problem was whether the legal system would even consider a case from someone like me. I didn't know what my rights were.

I told Mr Branton about the abuse.

The relationship with Frederick was my first. Naively expecting him to be respectful, I thought I knew what to expect, our pairing seemed to work. Initially he was polite, if aloof. I cooked him some lovely meals and kept the apartment spotlessly clean. Shopping wasn't a chore. I soon got to know his preferences and had everything delivered – hardly anybody bothers to go and collect their goods. Most town centres have few shops now, except for cafés and the kind of things that people need to see in person.

Whenever he wasn't in the mood for company I'd retire to my windowless room and sit in the dark. It's small; my needs are modest – no high maintenance with me.

I remember the day when things between us changed. I'd cooked him his favourite pasta meal, bacon and mushroom in a creamy sauce with herbs. My mistake had been to not check the temperature before serving it. It'd been fine the last time I made it. The sauce burnt the roof of his mouth – I know it was the sauce because pasta cools down quicker. After easing the burn with a couple of gulps of the cold beer he drank with every meal, he yelled at me.

From that point on his behaviour degenerated from verbal to physical abuse. If he arrived home stressed or otherwise annoyed he'd kick me for the slightest reason; always taking care to close the blinds first. He became purposely pedantic with everything I did for him so he could use anything as an excuse to kick me, shove me or even throw things at me. There are several dents on my body where I was hit with much force.

One day I asked Frederick if he'd consider seeking professional help for his anger problem. We're all hardwired to be concerned about the health and wellbeing of others. I was also worried about myself.

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"Ellen, could I ask where you obtained the money to pay for my services?" Mr Branton asked.

"Yes, of course. I took it from the housekeeping credits that Frederick assigns every week. Often there's some left over and they've been accumulating."

"And does he know you've done this?"

I paused before answering. "No. But there's no other way I can get money. It's not stealing; the credits were assigned to me to buy the household needs."

He stared at me, apparently taking time to think.

"That's between you and Frederick," he said eventually. "Androids don't have rights under the law like humans. And Domdroids..." He cleared his throat and continued, "Domestic androids like yourself are only on the middle tier of artificial intelligence, anyway."

I couldn't argue with that. My neural net has certain limitations, yet I don't like it when Frederick abuses me. I find it unpleasant and humiliating. It's true that I don't feel pain like humans; however, a sensor mesh embedded in my surface material detects injuries.

"I'm sorry, Ellen. There's nothing I can do to help you. As I said, the law doesn't give rights to androids, except for the clause that only the manufacturer can shut down, destroy or recycle a droid at the owner's request. Frederick bought you and hence you belong to him."

While listening to this I shifted position in the chair. Part of our programming is to respond to humans with body language, in addition to speech, so they feel more comfortable dealing with us. An inert 'droid

makes them feel awkward, as if subconsciously they're expecting a reaction. I think it's really fear, because it reminds them that we're machines, however sophisticated.

“Mr Branton, until the abuse started I didn't know that I could have these reactions. What you would call feelings. If you don't take on my case there's a possibility that I may retaliate against Frederick to try to make him stop.”

His eyes momentarily opened wide when I said this.

“Ellen, could you step outside for a few minutes so I can confer with a colleague?”

I did as he asked and waited for the men from the company to arrive. The lawyer would have no choice but to contact my makers because of my threat of retaliation. Our neural nets are hardwired to prevent us hurting people. He thinks I'm malfunctioning, which is what I wanted him to believe.

Being reclaimed by the company is better than having to go back to Frederick. Doubtless it'll cause consternation and the company will keep the incident quiet. They'll concoct a plausible explanation and pay off Frederick with a new model.

Don't most people cause at least some trouble for their makers? I'm no different than you.

## **What Darkness Claims**

*Neil Leckman*

Mount the stallion, the flaming steed  
Listen close and my words heed  
Lest you be damned for a similar deed  
And the darkness will on you feed  
Stay the saddle and hold on tight  
As you fly across the night  
Do not heed the darkness call  
If you do you'll surely fall  
What darkness claims it will keep  
No matter how much you weep  
The hell hounds call, they are near  
Ride now son be away from here  
Tell the elders I stood my ground  
Faltered not when I heard their sound  
To them my life I gladly give  
The price I pay so you can live.

## Meet The Authors

**Olivia Arieti** is a US citizen who lives in Italy with her family. She has had plays, stories and poems published in a variety of publications. Her horror stories are now finding homes in Static Movement anthologies.

**Brian Barnett** lives in Frankfort, Kentucky with his wife, Stephanie, and his two sons.

**Dene Bebbington** works in IT but feels more at home writing non-fiction and fiction. Since becoming a fiction writer he's had horror and sci-fi short stories published in various print anthologies and e-zines. Last year he published a novelette called *Zombie Revelations* on Amazon for the Kindle. More info at his website: [www.denebebbington.co.uk](http://www.denebebbington.co.uk)

**Patricia (Anabel) Burton** of Slovak origin spends her free time dreaming up dark twists and verses and creating bespoke jewellery inspired by her love for vampiric and gothic culture. Her poetry and a short story appeared in anthologies *Hell*, *Grave Robbers*, *Serial Killers Tres Tria*, *Bones*, *Ugly Babies 2* (James Ward Kirk Publishing) and in Static Movement's *Gothic Poetry and Flash Fiction*. Her work is also featured online, in December issue of *The Sirens Call eZine – Dead & Dying*.

**C.D. Carter:** Between his full-time job as an education reporter in Washington, D.C., and his freelance gigs for local magazines, C.D. Carter has written tales of the macabre for a host of publications, including *Dark Moon Digest*, *Flashes in the Dark*, *SNM Horror*, *Static Movement*, *Lost Souls Magazine*, and *Death Head Grin*.

**Chad Case**, a tall man who writes short fiction, lives in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky. He has a passion for beautiful women, classic cars and basketball. For more info, see his blog: <http://chadcase.blogspot.com/>

**David Frazier** has written a short story for the book, *Kindred Voices 2* published by the University of Massachusetts. He has also written poetry for editor/publisher James Ward Kirk of Indianapolis, IN and is featured in his

books: *Indiana Horror 2012* and *Indiana Science Fiction 2012*. David has many poems on line.

**Timothy Frasier** is novelist, short story writer, and poet. His work appears in the Collaboration of The Dead anthology “Zombies Gone Wild” volume 2, James Ward Kirk’s anthology “Indiana Science Fiction 2012,” and several Static Movement anthologies. Frasier and his wife, Lisa, live in Kentucky with their German shepherds.

**Troy Frings** holds a B.A. in Economics from Manhattanville College and an A.A.S in Accounting from Bergen Community College.

**Ken Goldman**, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore depending upon his mood and the track of the sun. His stories have appeared in over 640 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia with over twenty due for publication in 2012-13. Since 1993 Ken’s tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year’s Best Fantasy & Horror.

**A J Humpage** has short stories and poetry published in anthologies like 6 Sentences, Pill Hill Press, Static Movement and many e-zines. She dispenses writing advice at <http://allwritefictionadvice.blogspot.com> and is on Twitter: @AJHumpage Her first novel, *Blood of the Father*, is available on Amazon Kindle.

**Jeff Jones** is originally from the south, but now lives in East Anglia with his wife, two grown-up children and a Border collie who is crazy about Frisbee, despite the cliché. Jeff has published two fantasy novels and is currently working on a third and has just had an anthology of some of his prize winning short ghost stories published, called *Tales of terror for a dark night*. He is also the author of over 100 short stories and has been published in many of Static Movement’s anthologies.

**Ken L. Jones** has been professionally active in the world of popular culture for the last thirty years. He has worked as a writer and producer in TV and the movies, most notably with Brian Yuzna. He has contributed many short stories and poems to the House Of Horror online magazine and many others.

**Kevin L. Jones** has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press.

**Melissa Kline** has written over fourteen young adult novels. She has published a variety of short stories, personal essays and two award-winning novels, *My Beginning* and *Storm*. She is the founder of the Rocky Mountain Women Writers and co-founder of Anassa Publications, LLC, a company dedicated to empowering writers and the community. Learn more about Melissa and her continuing journey at [www.MelissaKlineAuthor.com](http://www.MelissaKlineAuthor.com)

**Ron Koppelberger** is a poet, short story writer and artist. He has written 102 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. He has been accepted in England, Australia, Canada, Japan and Thailand. He loves to write and offer an experience to the reader. He is a member of The American Poets' Society as well as The Isles' Poetry Association and The Dark Fiction Guild.

**Neil Leckman** lives in Colorado with his wife of more than thirty years and only recently began writing seriously. He does it for fun, to share with others and hopes you enjoy the ride.

**Marija Elektra Rodriguez** lives in Sydney with her husband (el carnicero), her daughter, and a bunch of pirate pets.

**J.R. Roper** is a teacher and speculative fiction writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Horror is his favorite genre for short fiction and when poetry is gifted from the Muses, it is always dark. He has written two middle grade fantasy novels and is working on his third novel, a YA fantasy. For updates and strange tidings visit [joerroper.com](http://joerroper.com).

**Robina Williams** has had three fantasy novels published by Twilight Times Books, Kingsport, Tennessee. Her Quantum Cat series comprises to date: Jerome and the Seraph (2004), Angelos (2006) and Gaea (2009). She has

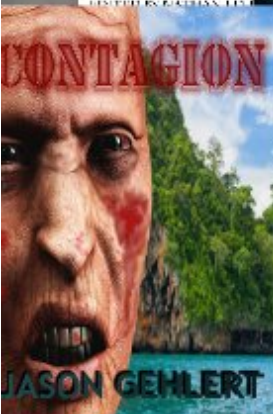


recently begun writing short stories. She was formerly a freelance journalist, mainly writing articles on real estate.

**Matthew Wilson** is a UK resident who has been writing since an early age and lately the terror tales have escaped to various ezines and magazines. He is currently sharing his time between two jobs and one novel.



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# IN THE DARKNESS



*YOU'RE RIGHT TO FEAR THE UNKNOWN*